COULD IT BE TRUE?

JON HOBBS

Could it be True?

Why to think again about Christianity.

Jon worked in business and as a policeman before becoming a Christian and training for church leadership. He is the minister of Grace Church Haywards Heath and the Associate Trainer for the Sussex Gospel Partnership.

Contents.

Jackpot.

Vinyl records over digital downloads. Log fires over electric fires. Books over Kindle. Not everything that's new is better.

In our day many are realising that our race to embrace the latest thing can cause us to miss out on the quality of objects from the past. And that can be true for beliefs too.

As a minister I often chat to people about Christianity. Many respond that they're too busy, that they don't really think about religion, that it's not their thing, or that they've developed their own beliefs. The assumption seems to be that the Christian faith doesn't need consideration – that it is either unimportant, or nonsense, or without

foundation and so just a matter of what someone feels is right for them.

If you think this way I can appreciate why. I once thought the same. Ours is a society that for all sorts of reasons has gone off religion – and especially Christianity. But it is important to realize that pretty much all cultures throughout history have held that religious belief really matters. The majority of people outside of the west still do. In fact, there are around 2.5 billion Christians alive today, each of whom could give reasons for their faith. This alone should give pause for thought.

In 2006 Joe Smith missed a lottery win. He had the ticket all the time but never checked it. He just assumed it could never happen. Likewise, many never get around to properly checking out Christianity. Everyone in the UK

grows up with it as a cultural backdrop, a church within walking distance, or a friend who follows Christ. But the faith itself is rarely examined – often because it is assumed that the things Christians believe could never be true, or that they are a superstitious leftover from the past.

But what if this is mistaken? What if it is to miss out on the jackpot?

This short book outlines six reasons to think again about Christianity. I hope you can give half an hour to considering them. Much more could be said and there are questions that need answers. But in a day when busyness keeps so many from pondering these things, this has been written simply to help people see that Christianity really does warrant a closer look.

1 Christianity makes sense of the world.

One reason for the lack of interest in religion is because of the way many Brits have been impacted by western culture. We've been led to think that what exists is only what we can measure or experiment on, and that believing there is something or someone behind it all is like believing in the Wizard of Oz.

In a very real sense the idea of looking into Christianity is therefore like being asked to look at the bottom of the garden to see if there are fairies. It seems so nonsensical that people don't give it a second thought.

But everyone lives according to certain beliefs about how humanity got here and how the world can be saved

from its problems. It's not that the non-religious live in the real world of rationality and reason and the religious live in a cartoon world of fantasy and faith. We all live in the same world. We are all expressing faith in certain things being true on the basis of what we pick up as we journey through life. In that sense we are all religious.

The key question is whether our faith is well founded. And the truth is that there are a whole number of hints that there is more to the universe than just the physical world. Let's briefly consider just four of these "pointers to God."[1]

---

[1] For a fuller treatment, see: Evans, C Stephen, *"Why Christian faith still makes sense: A response to contemporary challenges."*

1) Our spiritual awareness: The vast majority of the world believe in some kind of God or power that guides their life. And many who don't, still feel an aching dissatisfaction or loneliness that can only be described as a hunger or thirst for "something more." But we feel physical hunger, thirst and loneliness, because the things we pine for actually exist. So, it makes no sense at all to presume that the things we spiritually ache for don't. When we feel a longing as human beings, it is because there is a reality that satisfies it.

2) Our very existence: We still have no answer as to what started our universe or whatever was before it. Mathematicians tell us that the probability of it developing in the way it has is so infinitesimally small as to be

impossible but for some form of guidance or design. This has led cosmologists to speculate about an infinite number of universes as a way of making our own more likely. But the question as to existence remains. And the more we learn, the more astonishing that existence seems to be.

3) Our provocation at evil: In the absence of a moral God, thinkers also find it incredibly hard to find a logical basis for truly selfless acts that don't benefit our race, or for condemning barbaric acts that we consider wrong but another culture considers right. The point is that unless there is a moral something or someone who has made us to live a certain way, we have no real grounds for saying anything at all is fundamentally good or bad. Evil would just be what

human animals do. Yet deep down we know that certain things should be opposed.

4) Our discomfort with suffering: We're also taught that suffering and death are at least in some sense "good" because they are part of the means by which our species develops. But when we see the weak suffering, we know it should not be. And when we face death at the funeral of a loved one, we sense that life really should carry on. In short, even those who don't believe in heaven strangely long for it.

Not all these "pointers" are likely to resonate with you. And none of them are knock-down proofs of what Christians believe. But they are certainly a prod to think again.

2 Christianity offers a better way.

Our previous home was in a cul-de-sac of large front gardens. Everyone wanted to be well thought of so everyone kept theirs pristine. We were happy to let our back garden become a mess as long the one on show looked good!

Our lives are so often like this. We present well to others: happy and secure. But behind the front door there is so often fighting, anxiety, stress and heartache.

For some, life is good. There's a sense in which they are the front garden. But it is hard to deny that behind the scenes our culture is in an increasing mess. A friend who has worked in mental health for the last fifteen years said how he's

seen things getting worse and worse. He described ours as a *"broken society,"* but added that no-one is willing to face up to it.

The question we must ask is: Why is this? There is much to celebrate in our culture - increasing equality between people groups, free health care, technological advances and more. But it is arguable that as we have turned from a Christian way of seeing things, people's sense of wellbeing has got worse.

That's not to say life was always better centuries ago. Appalling things have been done in every generation, and sometimes in the name of Christianity. But when we consider what it actually means to live as a Christian, it's not hard to see its benefits.

You might need some persuading of this. Sadly, individuals and institutions

that represent Christianity can still give it a bad name. So, it may help to consider what Christian living actually involves.

The life we were made for.

In the film "the Hobbit," the director Peter Jackson makes an appearance – although just eating a carrot. This helps us understand the central conviction of Christianity. It is not just that there is a good and personal God directing our universe, but that he wrote himself into history as a man in order to reach out to us.

That man was called Jesus, and he lived in what is now Israel from around 4BC to AD30. He is given the title "Christ" because the Jewish religion he was born into was waiting for a ruler they called "Christ," who was expected

to put everything that is wrong with our world, right.

It was as this Christ that Jesus called people to turn away from living for themselves in order to follow him and, by doing so, turn to God and embrace the life he created us to live. It is a life that is marked by five particular concerns:

1) It is to cherish all things: It is to accept that our universe is not here by chance, but has been created by God for our enjoyment and entrusted to our care. This leads to a profound understanding of love demonstrated so clearly by Jesus himself: It is to so cherish God and all he has made, that we relegate our own desires in order to do right for him, his world, and all who live in it. As Jesus put it: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart*

and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself."[2]

2) It is to practice love: This understanding of love shows itself in everything from looking after your parents to looking after your employees. It explains why Christianity advocates honesty and generosity in matters of money, and purity and faithfulness in matters of sex. It should move the Christian to care for all people, not only in rejecting hatred and violence, but in standing up for the poor and oppressed, such as the homeless, the disabled, the immigrant, the unborn and the elderly.

---

[2] Matthew's Gospel, chapter 22 verses 37-39

3) It is to seek justice: This follows. To rightly live as a Christian includes promoting justice in the courts and seeking a righting of wrongs, especially for those who because of circumstance might not receive it. But it also means being honest and kind in all our dealings with people, speaking in a way that is true yet thoughtful, to build people up rather than tear them down.

4) It is to learn humility: Rather than make the Christian judgmental, all this should actually humble them as they realise how much they fail to live up to these standards themselves. The true Christian comes to see that none of us are what we should be. The desires we have and the decisions we make are so often wrong and even warped. That's why we need the help Jesus gives.

5) It is to discover contentment: The Christian life is one that finds a real peace in receiving that help: in knowing we have God's forgiveness when we do fail, his wisdom and strength to live his way, and a certain hope beyond death when things get hard. More than that, it is to live in thankfulness to God for all the good we enjoy, and not always be striving for more to the detriment of the environment, or of our own life or family. And it is to find our place and purpose in the community of a good church, where people encourage each other in all these things, and seek to care for one-another as they serve Christ together.

The fuel we were made for.

My point in outlining all this is not to imply that Christians are somehow better

than others. It is simply to suggest that the wisdom and goodness of Christ's teaching is its own pointer to the truth of what Christians believe about him.

If my car breaks down on diesel but runs smoothly on petrol, it means that petrol is the fuel for which my car has been made. In the same way, if the human "machine" operates better on Christ's teaching, could that be because his teaching comes from our maker – that we've been designed for it?

It's not hard to see how much our lives and culture would be enriched if we truly put what Jesus taught into practice. This is often acknowledged.

In 2008, journalist Matthew Parris wrote an article titled "As an atheist, I believe Africa needs God."[3] Returning to

[3] https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/as-an-atheist-i-truly-believe-africa-needs-god-3xj9bm80h8m

where he grew up in Malawi, he wrote of the difference he saw in Christians there compared to others: *"Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good…their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them. There was a liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world - a directness in their dealings with others - that seemed to be missing in traditional African life. They stood tall!"*

Ours is what's termed an "individualistic" society. Many have noted its concern with celebrating self, asserting self and satisfying self. We no longer agree that there is a moral God who has made us to live a certain way, so truth has become whatever the individual wants it to be. We're told we can be whoever we want and do whatever we want – as long as it doesn't hurt others. The problem is that it often does hurt

others. The fallout is all around us: broken hearts, broken relationships, broken lives.

By contrast, Christ's is an "other-centred" society. It's about finding the deepest joy and peace in denying self for the sake of others, because we serve him. Perhaps you've seen something of this already in a Christian you know.

At the end of his book "Generation X" Douglas Coupland confesses: "*My secret is that I need God, that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give because I no longer seem to be capable of giving. To help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness. To help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."*

This is the cry of our inner back gardens.

3 Christianity is too good to miss.

Of course, non-religion is not the only alternative to Christianity. Many seek to live by these sorts of values and have their own private spirituality or belief in God as they conceive him to be.

If that describes you, it would be easy for you to assume that you have no need to consider Christianity. But a basic understanding of what Jesus actually taught implies quite the opposite.

He lived in a culture where people held all kinds of beliefs, and many of his fellow Jews were extremely religious. Yet what he had to say to them about spirituality and knowing God was both deeply challenging and wonderfully liberating.

Connecting with God.

1) About true spirituality: Many assume that all spirituality or religion stems from human beings trying to work out for themselves whether there is a God or a spiritual dimension to life. But Jesus taught that to follow one's own religious ideas and not the teachings of the Bible was to *"worship God in vain"* because it was to hold to merely *"human traditions"* rather than *"the commands of God."*[4]

His point was that if we try and work such things out for ourselves, we'll head off on the wrong path. And if we think about it, this certainly makes sense. Our perspective is so limited, and the motives which govern what we will choose to believe are so often mixed. This makes forming our own beliefs rather like a

[4] Mark's Gospel, chapter 7 verses 5-13

poor attempt at map reading. Unaware of exactly where we are heading, we choose roads that enable us to enjoy the religious landscapes we prefer, irrespective of whether they are taking us where we really need to go!

Wonderfully, Jesus taught that it doesn't have to be this way, for in his kindness God has made himself known through various interventions in history, and ensured that they have been recorded for us in the books that make up the Bible. So, it is here that we need to look for reliable knowledge about God and his purposes. In other words, it is here that we find the map that we need.

Some find the idea of a book containing truth from God rather fantastical. But a moment's thought shows just how wise it is. Human beings

are great communicators, so it is quite reasonable to think that our creator would be. And what better way to communicate across time and culture, than a book that can be copied, translated, studied and discussed.

2) About knowing God: What is often not realised about Christianity, is that its focus is not simply on believing in God, but relating to him. And in terms of how we do this – how we get to actually know the God who is there, Jesus couldn't have been bolder. He said of himself: *"I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me."* He then added: *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" and "I am in the Father and the Father is in me."*[5]

[5] John's Gospel, chapter 14 verse 6

Jesus taught that God always exists in three spiritual persons called God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This is what Christians term the "Trinity." It reflects the fact that although there is only one God, he interacts within himself and with the world he has made rather like three people relating to one-another and the world around them. And of these three persons, Jesus stated that he was God the Son, clothed in a human nature – at one and the same time both God and man, the director of human history and a character within it.

What this means, is that we cannot say Jesus was just a good man or religious teacher. He claimed so much more than that. He claimed that if we are to know and come to the true God, we must know and come to him. And this

helps us understand what being a Christian actually entails. It is not to simply abide by certain values or attend church. It is to truly know God through Jesus – seeing what he is like in Jesus, accepting what he has to say through Jesus, and then relating to him accordingly, as we trust him, obey him, serve him and pray to him.

It is therefore what the Bible teaches about Jesus above all else, that enables us to come to "know" God. This supreme being, who would otherwise be beyond our range of reference, has come close, not only so that we can know about him, but so that we can actually relate to him.

Finding the source.

At this point some might be starting to see why this is such good news. But others might be tempted to close the

book in provocation. Thankfully we live in a culture that makes much of peace between different religions. Surely, we might protest, to say people need to come to God through Jesus is intolerant and arrogant when you consider other's sincerely held beliefs.

But I hope you can see that if Jesus was our creator, then making these statements is no more intolerant or arrogant than saying all are welcome to the UK as long as they come through customs. It's simply to say that Jesus is the way into all God has for us.

Of course, this seems unfair when we consider those who never get to hear the Christian message. But we can be certain that if people really do long for God, he is well able to ensure that they hear about Christ so that they can come to him.

The fact is that if Jesus was (and so is) God-come-to-us, then it could only be in him that God could be properly seen, heard and known. More than that, it would mean that Jesus must be the very centre of the universe, the source of all life, and the ultimate ruler over this world as well as any world to come. It therefore makes no more sense to assume we can enjoy true spiritual life without him than it does to assume we can enjoy the next five minutes without breathing. A lamp can't light up without being plugged into its power source. In the same way, we cannot be all we might be without being plugged into our creator.

And it is here that we can note why all this is such good news. It is good news because Jesus makes this coming to God so easy.

Open to all.

Now this is so important to grasp, and requires us to see Christianity very differently to the way we might have previously seen it. I'll try to explain.

It's common to assume that if there is a God or a heaven, we reach them by being a good person – by living a good enough life. The religion of Jesus' day taught the same, just as religions today still do. And we might think this is quite reasonable. But what Jesus highlighted, was how divisive, exclusive, and ultimately hopeless this actually is: First, it leads those who have made a mess of life to wrongly assume that God would have no time for them. This is why Jesus went out of his way to spend time with those who were considered immoral and irreligious. Second, it ends up leaving all of us without hope, for none of us, in all

honesty, are truly and consistently good. And this is what Jesus sought to point out to those who considered themselves upstanding. As he himself said: *"No-one is good except God alone."* [6]

The fact is that we all do what we know is wrong, and sometimes in a terrible way. You may have felt something of that in reading the section about the Christian life. None of us can properly live up to it. And what remains so provocative about Jesus, is that his life and teaching continue to press that home. He critiques all other spirituality and religion by saying that, because of the wrong we do, we can't possibly presume to earn God's acceptance. Our creator is so utterly perfect, that no amount of good deeds or religious

---

[6] Luke's gospel, chapter 18 verse 19

practices could ever deserve his favour. Instead, we need him to grant us his favour as a gift.

And it is here that Jesus proves so radically inclusive, because he taught that this is exactly what God does. He promised that everyone who acknowledges that they have done wrong and comes to him for forgiveness, receives it. They are accepted by God no matter what their previous beliefs or lifestyle, and included as one of his people. In deciding to follow Christ, they then experience God helping them to live his way as he starts to unravel the knots of their lives, patch up their wounds, and give them dignity and purpose in serving him. They are even counted as God's children. So, they are loved by him even when they fail. And they receive a place in "the kingdom of

God" – a life beyond this one, in a renewed world that will be finally free of all pain, wrongdoing, heartache and death – the sort of world we know this one should be.

This is why the immoral and irreligious flocked to Jesus. All this is given freely by God, to any who are ready to come to him through his Son. It is to hit the jackpot. And it's yet another reason to think again.

4 Christianity is too important to ignore.

I'm always drawn to "tasters" in the supermarket. A morsel of cheese or cake is offered to the customer in the hope that they will like it and buy the whole thing. I have to admit to times when I've

repeatedly gone back to the same aisle for extra bites!

To follow Jesus and his teachings is a bit like this. It's a taster of what the everlasting life of his coming "kingdom" will be like. And that means that if we are unwilling to follow him and his teachings, we show that we don't in truth like the taste of the future he is offering – we don't actually want the goodness and purity of heaven!

Our great problem.

It is here that we have to face up to the most difficult truth Jesus taught. Again, and again he taught that he will judge everyone beyond death, calling them to account for how they've lived. He therefore urged people to *"make every effort"* to come to know him so that they can enter his kingdom after they die. He

warned that those who don't will find its door closed on them, and feel the deepest despair and agony in seeing God's people enjoying all he has to give whilst realising they are forever excluded from it.[7]

This experience beyond death is what Jesus called "hell." At first, we might assume it to be harsh. But what our taster illustration shows, is that in a very real sense it is simply for him to give those who don't want his life the full experience of what they ask for – existence apart from him and all the good that is bound up with him.

In the end, then, everyone gets what they truly desire. Those who show in this life that they want life with Jesus, receive it, wonderfully, forever. And those who

[7] Luke's gospel, chapter 13 verse 22-30

don’t, don’t. This helps us see how hell is both just and appropriate.

The tragedy is that people don’t realise how terrible it will be. Some laugh it off with mocking caricatures or dismiss it as medieval fear-mongering. But Jesus stressed its horror: It is an expression of God's right outrage at the way human beings treat him, each-another, and the world he has given them. It is therefore where they must suffer whatever punishment is due for the wrong that they’ve done.

And it’s important to realise that this sort of righting of wrongs beyond death is actually a good and needed thing. It shows how seriously God takes all wrongdoing, and provides the justice the oppressed cry out for when their oppressors get away with the evil they

do. Just think how tyrants and abusers so often live well and die peacefully.

But it is just here that our problem becomes clear, for as we've already seen, we all wrong others – at least to some degree? Our complacency and selfishness towards those God has made (not to mention our thanklessness towards him) must only increase his anger with every day that passes. That's why hell must be the fate of all who are unwilling to take Jesus up on the forgiveness and life that he offers.

We might think of this world like a house, kitted out with all we could need. With immense generosity, God allows us to inhabit it for free, whilst building an even better one for us to enjoy. If people trash this current house, abuse other tenants, and forget or ignore the landlord, wouldn't it be right for them to

be excluded from the upgrade? The landlord can hardly be blamed. He already gives them so much more than they deserve by allowing them to remain despite their behaviour.

But consider for a moment that he is ready to forgive any tenants who seek it from him. More than that, he will guarantee them a place in the new property. Yet when he sends his son to tell them, they ignore him – some even with hostility. What then?

God's rescue plan.

Hell is real. But it is not inevitable. The heart of the Christian message is that the Son of God came into the world as Jesus not only to offer God's forgiveness, but to make it possible. He was executed by being nailed to a wooden cross. Yet he taught that he had to die in that way in

order to pay off the punishment human wrongdoing deserves and so satisfy the demands of God's justice towards it. As he put it the night before he died: his blood would be *"poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*[8]

God's love for us all is displayed in the many good things of life that he gives us, no matter what our attitude to him. But it is displayed most supremely in giving his Son to die on our behalf. Jesus' death is proof of God's deep concern that we escape the hell he must dispense. And it means that whatever our previous attitude to Jesus, whatever wrongs we might have done, those who come to him will never have to face what their wrongdoing deserves. Jesus faced it for them. So, their penalty is paid – fully and

[8] Matthew's gospel, chapter 26 verse 28

finally. They can therefore live knowing that they are right with God, that he is for them in this life, and that they have a place in the life to come. Yet by ignoring Jesus, all this is forfeited.

As real as rain.

I remember a conversation with a friend some years back. It was all very amicable even when it turned to talk of hell. But as soon as I said that believing such things isn't a matter of personal preference he was deeply provoked. However, that is the thing we must face up to. If Jesus was who he claimed to be, then we must accept his teaching. And so, we can no more reject the reality of hell because we don't like it than we can reject the reality of rain because we don't like getting wet. It's one further reason to take the time to consider Jesus properly. After all, if we

thought we might be seriously ill, we wouldn't hesitate to seek out a doctor.

CS Lewis authored the famous Narnia books. As an Oxford professor he moved from being a strong sceptic about Christianity to someone who was convinced. In his book "God in the dock," he wrote: *"Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important."*

What Jesus teaches couldn't matter more for us or for our families. And this raises the critical question our next point must address: Can we actually know whether Jesus was and is who he claimed – whether all this is therefore true?

5 Christianity has basis for its beliefs.

Nicolaus Copernicus was a sixteenth century astronomer. Before he lived, most people thought that our planet was the centre of the Solar System and that the sun and everything else revolved around us. It was a very human way of thinking! But what was termed "the Copernican revolution" was the discovery that actually the sun was the centre, and everything revolved around it.

It's that kind of revolution in thinking that this short book has been written to support. We consider ourselves to be the centre of our universe and often act as if everything should revolve around us. But Christians are convinced that the Son of

God is actually the centre, and we should therefore revolve around him.

The problem is that many assume there are no facts to support this revolution – that Christian belief is a sort of blind hope.

But we've already seen something of how reasonable it is. However, few are so easily persuaded. The Bible teaches that's because we're not as rational as we assume that we are. For example, the smoker happily ignores or explains away the harm it does because they like smoking. And there's great temptation to do the same with what we've considered, so that we can continue to enjoy our lives as they are.

It is for this reason that Jesus gave an even firmer foundation for faith. He pointed to the things he did as proof of who he was: *'For the works that the Father*

has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me."[9]

Modern struggles.

What people often fail to grasp is that faith in Christ is not ultimately based on whether we find that his teachings always resonate, whether they give us the answers we want for our questions, or even whether we like them. That would be to say that I will only accept a God if he holds to my opinions and preferences, or those of my time in history! But the intelligence and insight of our Creator must be as far above our own as the stars are above the sea.

And the truth is that our own ideas are extremely changeable. As people in

[9] John's gospel, chapter 5 verse 36

our culture have turned from Christianity over the last few decades, what they assume is right and wrong has changed accordingly. And as creatures of our culture that can make it hard to fully appreciate the wisdom of what Jesus had to say. Elements of his teaching can grate today in a way that they never did for previous generations.

But the key question remains: Is Jesus who he claimed to be? If he's not the Son of God, then if we struggle with his teaching we can forget about him. But if he is, then we must follow him whatever, trusting that he will know what is best. In other words, we must have our life and thinking find their right place in revolving around him. And if we have children or loved ones, we would long for theirs to do so too.

So what further evidence do we have on which to weigh Jesus' claim? What did he do that is so convincing?

Miracles with meaning.

There are four records of Jesus' life that you can find in the Bible. They are called gospels and titled according to their authors – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They claim to be eyewitness accounts, and record Jesus doing the sort of things only God could do – driving evil influences out of people; healing others instantaneously from sickness or deformity; even calming storms and bringing the dead back to life.

These miracles cannot be properly understood without grasping the Jewish context Jesus lived in. Jewish religious texts (known as scriptures) written hundreds of years before Jesus, claimed

to record visions and messages from God. They predicted that God would one day come to judge the world, forgive those who turned to him, and rescue them from all evil, suffering and oppression. By releasing people from just these things, Jesus' miracles were intended to show that all this had begun with him, that he was therefore one with God and could deliver on this promise. In other words, the miracles were to confirm everything that we've been learning.

The most significant miracle the gospels record is that of Jesus coming alive again three days after he died. Christians call this "the resurrection." We don't have space to outline the evidence in full. But up to 500 people claimed to have seen Jesus over a period of forty days after he died - not as a sort

of ghost, but someone they could touch and eat with. They claim to have then witnessed him rise up in the air and into heaven.

Christians see the resurrection as the supreme demonstration that God, the author of life, was with Jesus, and that a perfect bodily life beyond death is on offer in him – a life that is tasted even now as he enables us to start living God's way.

Weighing the witnesses.

What, then, are we to make of all this? Your first reaction might be to dismiss miracles as make-believe. But if God were to come to us as a man, wouldn't we expect these sorts of things? How else might people be expected to believe?

And so, we must ask ourselves another critical question: Can the events

we find in the gospels be explained away? If not, we owe it to ourselves to consider them very carefully indeed.

Here it seems there are only four possibilities:[10]

1) Some assume the writers only intended the gospels to be read as symbolic stories. This argument really has no weight when actually reading them. Their whole purpose is to persuade people that certain things actually happened. And there is no question that their initial recipients understood them to be history.

2) But could the writers be mistaken in what they recorded? Someone might mistake a glancing shadow for a loved one they lost. But it's quite another thing to have

[10] For a thorough treatment, see FF Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are they reliable?*

mass testimony to numerous miracles and to seeing someone rise from the dead and ascend into heaven. First century Jews were no more gullible than us. They were aware of tricksters and knew how nature works. And from the moment these things happened they were continually talked about, cementing them in people's memory and so protecting against later confusion or exaggeration.

3) Perhaps the writers fabricated the miracles. The gospels were written just thirty to fifty years after Jesus passed into heaven. So, eyewitnesses still lived who could challenge any error. And the authors had no reason to make their accounts up. They faced the most extreme hostility and death for what they wrote. People will maintain a lie when they have

something to gain, but not when it means losing everything. Moreover, the gospels show no signs of fabrication in an attempt to persuade. They include things readers would have found objectionable about Jesus, record people's scepticism about him, and readily detail the failings of the disciples.

4) Couldn't the accounts of miracles have been added later on? But from the time of Jesus, the things he said and did were being preached, discussed and written of, all over the civilized world. And the gospels were quickly copied and disseminated. Any changing of the facts would therefore have been impossible, not just because it would have been challenged by what was known elsewhere, but because it would have required a regathering of hundreds (if not

thousands) of copies so that they could all be altered.

Evidence that demands a verdict.
In his book "The God delusion," the atheist Richard Dawkins famously defined religious faith as *"belief without evidence."* We can now see that this seriously misrepresents what Christianity claims for itself.

There is no good reason to doubt that Jesus did the very things the gospels record. In fact, even non-Christian historians of the time recorded that he did what was considered miraculous and that his followers believed he rose from the dead.

What is perhaps most compelling, however, is Jesus himself. Meeting him in the pages of the gospels is its own

evidence for faith. When you read them, there are two things to note.

First, the person of Jesus counters the idea that the gospel writers were making up what they wrote. It's hard to imagine even the greatest authors inventing someone of such supreme character, who perfectly fits the expectations of numerous Jewish scriptures, whilst bringing the most penetrating insights to them.

Second, the profundity of Jesus' character and teaching also enables us dismiss alternative explanations as to who he was. It has been pointed out that a man who claims people's allegiance as God on earth must be either a particularly evil *liar* who is after personal gain, a particularly unhinged *lunatic* who has lost the plot, or the *Lord God* he claims to be. But Jesus' frank honesty

and goodness shows he was not evil or in any way given to deception. Consider his compassion for the needy, his confrontation of the proud, and his readiness to stick to his message even to the point of death. Yet his self-control and consistency show he was not unhinged either. Consider how he always had the right word for every situation, whether in answering objectors, challenging followers, or maximising on sudden opportunities to teach. Surprising as it may be, this leaves Lord as the only remaining option.

Of course, we might debate this. And if it was the only grounds for faith, we might consider it insufficient. But it is supported by Jesus' wisdom, which surpasses that of a mere man. As many throughout history have acknowledged, he taught the deepest truths with the

most memorable simplicity. Factor in the miracles, the resurrection, and the pointers to God we began with, and we have a case that warrants the closest possible attention.

A firm foundation.

The Copernican revolution would have come about through the convergence of all sorts of lines of evidence: observation, data, maths. Each would have pointed to the same conclusion, increasing the certainty of the matter. Apart they would have been compelling, but together they were convincing. And they left Copernicus with the realisation that the sun is indeed the centre of the Solar System.

The evidence for Jesus being the Son of God is rather like that. And I would respectfully suggest that it gives

Christianity a foundation no other religion or set of beliefs has. Indeed, what surprised me when I first considered these things, was that this is a firmer foundation even than that of the prevailing atheistic worldview, with its belief that reality somehow came into being without a cause, and that there is therefore no ultimate purpose, justice or goodness.

Christian faith is not a blind hope that certain ideas are true. It is a confident trust in the person of Jesus. On the evidence of all he said and did as recorded for us in the gospels, it is to trust that he was and so is the Son of God. It is to trust that there is therefore a good and personal God, who knows each one of us, and is ready not only to forgive, help, and transform us, but give

us an everlasting life if we will only come to Christ for it.

But before we finish, there is one final prompt to think again.

6 We don't know as much as we think.

In 2017 many of us enjoyed watching the Blue Planet II. It not only brought home the wonder of the natural world, but how little we really understand.

In the first episode, David Attenborough acknowledged that we know less about the ocean floor than we do the surface of mars. It had previously been assumed that the deepest depths of the ocean were barren of all life. But the program had discovered that in reality the sea bed was as full of life as a jungle.

Could it be that we make the same mistake when we assume that our universe lacks a life-giving creator? If we know so little about our own planet, how can we claim to know so much about the cosmos?

Not wishful thinking.

It is true that some dismiss the things we've considered as primitive and even childish. They say that to believe in a father-like God who judges the world and establishes a perfect kingdom is simply to create ideas out of human concepts to give ourselves meaning and hope. But can I suggest this is to be very close-minded? Could it not be the other way around?

The Bible's teaching is that the God who is there is of such immense power and wisdom that he has fashioned a

universe that contains fathers and kingdoms (and everything else) to reflect truth about him – to help us grasp what he is like and what it is that he is bringing about. And a moment's reflection on the sheer capability of a being who could create and sustain our universe gives every reason to accept that he could have done just that.

The fact is that every one of the 8 billion people alive today comprise on average 37 trillion cells, each a self-replicating biological factory. These people live on a planet orbiting one star out of around 100 billion in our galaxy. But our galaxy is only one of 100 billion galaxies, each containing 100 billion stars!

It's all very humbling. And it further tells us that the God who governs it all could never be fully understood by us.

Indeed, when we consider the existence of such a being, we must accept that there will be a lot more going on in space-time-history than we are party to. So, we should not be surprised if we are left with questions as to why the world is as it is, why our lives have panned out as they have, or why God does what he does. For example, the existence of suffering and evil is a very real struggle for most people when they think of God.

But our inability to fully grasp these things is not a reason to reject Christianity, because Christian faith has the firmest of foundations: In great love for us all, the God who is actually there has made himself known in the person of Jesus, showing that he is supremely good, wise and trustworthy, and calling us to enjoy life with him and his people now in the church, and forever in the

world to come. More than that, in Jesus he has done things that only he could do, to wake us up to all this.

The instincts of so many are right. There is a God. And the good news is that he is not silent. He can therefore be known and trusted. And he should be, for he has reached out to us so that we might be his.

What now?

Much more could be said, and other evidences given – not least that Jesus' activity continues in the lives of true Christians who seek to put him first. If you know such people, the difference you see is its own nudge. But there is a danger of overload, so we will finish.

It was Winston Churchill who said: *"Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing ever happened."*

I confess that it is hard in a cynical age to give all we've considered the weight it should have without being thought overly intense. But I hope what you've read has provoked you to think again and see just how wise it is to give time to thinking further. Above all, I hope that you will not just hurry off like those Churchill had in mind.

If you have a Christian friend who has given you this book, the best next step would be to ask them to look at one of the gospel records of Jesus' life with you. All over the country Christians meet friends in this way. They agree how regularly they want to get together, and then meet up in a café, pub or home, to

read and chat over a portion of one of these eyewitness accounts. There really is no better way to get started.

An alternative would be for you to get in touch with a good church near you. You can find one here:

http://thegospelpartnerships.org.uk/network

Further reading.

"Real lives" by DJ Carswell (true stories of people who have found their lives changed on coming to faith in Christ)

"The Case for Christ" by Lee Strobel (a Harvard educated journalist investigates the historical evidence)

"What kind of God?" by Michael Ots (10 common objections considered)

"But is it true?" by Michael Ots (10 further objections considered)

"Mere Christianity" by CS Lewis (a more stretching argument that our sense of morality points to the truth of Christianity)

Fourth edition
(25.4.19)