



1

# The Right Approach



**I**n the beginning God." The first four words of the Bible are more than an introduction to the creation story or to the book of Genesis. They supply the key which opens our understanding to the Bible as a whole. They tell us that the religion of the Bible is a religion of the initiative of God.

You can never take God by surprise. You can never anticipate him. He always makes the first move. He is always there "in the beginning." Before man existed, God acted. Before man stirs himself to seek God, God has sought man. In the Bible we do not see man groping after God; we see God reaching after man.

Many people visualize a God who sits comfortably on a distant throne, remote, aloof, uninterested and indifferent to the needs of mortals, until, it may be, they can badger him into taking action on their behalf. Such a view is wholly false. The Bible reveals a God who, long before it even occurs to man to turn to





him, while man is still lost in darkness and sunk in sin, takes the initiative, rises from his throne, lays aside his glory, and stoops to seek until he finds him.

This sovereign, anticipating activity of God is seen in many ways. He has taken the initiative in *creation*, bringing the universe and its contents into existence: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." He has taken the initiative in *revelation*, making known to mankind both his nature and his will: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." He has taken the initiative in *salvation*, coming in Jesus Christ to set men and women free from their sins: "God . . . has visited and redeemed his people."<sup>1</sup>

God has created. God has spoken. God has acted. These statements of God's initiative in three different spheres form a summary of the religion of the Bible. It is with the second and third that we shall be concerned in this book, because basic Christianity by definition begins with the historical figure of Jesus Christ. If God has spoken, his last and greatest word to the world is Jesus Christ. If God has acted, his noblest act is the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ.

God has spoken and acted in Jesus Christ. He has said something. He has done something. This means that Christianity is not just pious talk. It is neither a collection of religious ideas nor a catalog of rules. It is a "gospel" (i.e., good news)—in Paul's words "the gospel of God . . . concerning his Son . . . Jesus Christ our Lord."<sup>2</sup> It is not primarily an invitation to man



<sup>1</sup>Genesis 1:1; Hebrews 1:1-2; Luke 1:68.

<sup>2</sup>Romans 1:1-4.





to do anything; it is supremely a declaration of what God has done in Christ for human beings like ourselves.

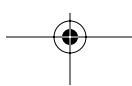
**GOD HAS SPOKEN**

Man is an insatiably inquisitive creature. His mind is so made that it cannot rest. It is always prying into the unknown. He pursues knowledge with restless energy. His life is a voyage of discovery. He is always questing, exploring, investigating, researching. He never grows out of the child's interminable "Why?"

When man's mind begins to concern itself with God, however, it is baffled. It gropes in the dark. It flounders helplessly out of its depth. Nor is this surprising, because God, whatever or whoever he may be, is infinite, while we are finite creatures. He is altogether beyond our comprehension. Therefore our minds, though wonderfully effective instruments in the empirical sciences, cannot immediately help us here. They cannot climb up into the infinite mind of God. There is no ladder, only a vast, unmeasured gulf. "Can you find out the deep things of God?" Job was asked. It is impossible.

And so the situation would have remained if God had not taken the initiative to remedy it. Man would have remained forever agnostic, asking indeed with Pontius Pilate, "What is truth?" but never staying for an answer, because never daring to hope that he would receive one. He would be a worshiper, for such is his nature; but all his altars would be inscribed, like the one in Athens, "To an unknown god."

But God has spoken. He has taken the initiative to disclose himself. The Christian doctrine of revelation is essentially reasonable. God has "unveiled" to our minds what would otherwise





have been hidden from them. Part of his revelation is in nature:

“The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.”

“What can be known about God is plain to them [that is, men], because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.”<sup>3</sup>

This is commonly called God’s “general” revelation (because it is made to all men everywhere) or “natural” revelation (because it is in nature). But this is not enough. It certainly makes known his existence, and something of his divine power, glory and faithfulness. But if man is to come to know God personally, to have his sins forgiven and to enter into relationship with God, he needs a more extensive and practical revelation still. God’s self-disclosure must include his holiness, his love and his power to save from sin. This too God has been pleased to give. It is a “special” revelation, because it was made to a special people (Israel) through special messengers (prophets in the Old Testament and apostles in the New).

It is also “supernatural” because it was given through a process commonly called “inspiration,” and it found its chief expression in the person and work of Jesus.

The way in which the Bible explains and describes this revelation is to say that God has “spoken.” We ourselves communicate with one another most easily by speech. It is by our words



---

<sup>3</sup>Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:19-20.





that we disclose what is in our minds. This is even more true of God who has desired to reveal his infinite mind to our finite minds. Since, as the prophet Isaiah put it, his thoughts are as much higher than our thoughts as the heavens are higher than the earth, we could never have come to know them unless he had clothed them in words. So “the word of the Lord came” to many prophets, until at last Jesus Christ came, and “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, “since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” Man comes to know God not through his own wisdom but through God’s Word (“what we preach”), not through human reason but through divine revelation. It is because God has made himself known in Christ that the Christian can boldly go to the agnostic and the superstitious and say to them, as Paul did to the Athenians on the Areopagus, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

Much of the controversy between science and religion has arisen through a failure to appreciate this point. The empirical method is largely inappropriate in the sphere of religion. Scientific knowledge advances through observation and experiment. It works on data supplied by the five physical senses. But when we inquire into the metaphysical, no data are immediately available. God today is neither tangible, visible nor audible. Yet there was a time when he chose to speak, and to clothe himself with a body which could be seen and touched. So John began his first

---

<sup>4</sup>John 1:1, 14.





epistle with the claim, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands . . . we proclaim also to you."

**GOD HAS ACTED**

The Christian good news is not confined to a declaration that God has spoken. It also affirms that God has acted.

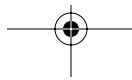
God has taken the initiative in both these ways because of the character of man's need. For we are not only ignorant; we are sinful. It is not sufficient therefore that God should have revealed himself to us to dispel our ignorance. He must also take action to save us from our sins. He began in Old Testament days. He called Abraham from Ur, making of him and his descendants a nation, delivering them from slavery in Egypt, entering into a covenant with them at Mount Sinai, leading them across the desert into the Promised Land, guiding and teaching them as his special people.

But all this was a preparation for his greater deed of redemption in Christ. Men needed to be delivered, not from slavery in Egypt or from exile in Babylon, but from the exile and the slavery of sin. It was for this principally that Jesus Christ came. He came as a Savior.

"You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

"The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

"For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost."





He was like the shepherd who missed the only sheep which was lost from the flock and went out to search until he found it.<sup>5</sup>

Christianity is a religion of salvation, and there is nothing in the non-Christian religions to compare with this message of a God who loved, and came after, and died for, a world of lost sinners.

**MAN'S RESPONSE**

God has spoken. God has acted. The record and interpretation of these divine words and deeds is to be found in the Bible. And there for many people they remain. As far as they are concerned, what God has said and done belongs to past history; it has not yet come out of history into experience, out of the Bible into life. God has spoken; but have we listened to his word? God has acted; but have we benefited from what he has done?

What we must do will be explained in the rest of this book. At this stage it is necessary to make only one point: we must seek. God has sought us. He is still seeking us. We must seek him. Indeed, God's chief quarrel with man is that he does not seek.

“The Lord looks down from heaven  
upon the children of men,  
to see if there are any that act wisely,  
that seek after God.  
They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt;  
there is none that does good,  
no, not one.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Matthew 1:21; 1 Timothy 1:15; Luke 19:10; 15:3-7.

<sup>6</sup>Psalm 14:2-3.





Yet Jesus promised: "Seek and you will find." If we do not seek, we shall never find. The shepherd searched until he found the lost sheep. The woman searched until she found her lost coin. Why should we expect to do less? God desires to be found, but only by those who seek him.

We must seek *diligently*. "Man is as lazy as he dares to be," wrote Emerson. But this matter is so serious that we must overcome our natural laziness and apathy and give our minds to the quest. God has little patience with triflers; "he rewards those who seek him."<sup>7</sup>

We must seek *humbly*. If apathy is a hindrance to some, pride is an even greater and commoner hindrance to others. We must acknowledge that our minds, being finite, are incapable of discovering God by their own effort without his self-revelation. I am not saying that we should suspend rational thinking. On the contrary, we are told by the psalmist not to be like a horse or a mule which have no understanding. We must use our mind; but we must also admit its limitation. Jesus said,

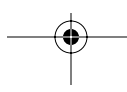
"I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes."

It is one of the reasons why Jesus loved children. They are teachable. They are not proud, self-important and critical. We need the open, humble and receptive mind of a little child.

We must seek *honestly*. We must come to what claims to be God's self-revelation not only without pride, but without prejudice; not only with a humble mind, but with an open mind.

---

<sup>7</sup>Hebrews 11:6.





Every student knows the dangers of approaching his subject with preconceived ideas. Yet many inquirers come to the Bible with their minds already made up. But God's promise is addressed only to the earnest seeker: "You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart."<sup>8</sup> So we must lay aside our prejudice and open our minds to the possibility that Christianity may after all be true.

We must seek *obediently*. This is the hardest condition of all to fulfill. In seeking God we have to be prepared not only to revise our ideas but to reform our lives. The Christian message has a moral challenge. If the message is true, the moral challenge has to be accepted. So God is not a fit object for man's detached scrutiny. You cannot fix God at the end of a telescope or a microscope and say "How interesting!" God is not interesting. He is deeply upsetting. The same is true of Jesus Christ.

We had thought intellectually to examine him; we find he is spiritually examining us. The roles are reversed between us. . . . We study Aristotle and are intellectually edified thereby; we study Jesus and are, in the profoundest way, spiritually disturbed. . . . We are constrained to take up some inward moral attitude of heart and will in relation to this Jesus. . . . A man may study Jesus with intellectual impartiality, he cannot do it with moral neutrality. . . . We must declare our colours. To this has our unevasive contact with Jesus brought us. We began it in the calm of the study; we are called out to the field of moral decision.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Jeremiah 29:13.

<sup>9</sup>P. Carnegie Simpson, *The Fact of Christ*, 1930; James Clarke edition, 1952, pp. 23, 24.





This is what Jesus meant when, addressing some unbelieving Jews, he said, "If any man's will is to do his [that is, God's] will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority." The promise is clear: we can know whether Jesus Christ was true or false, whether his teaching was human or divine. But the promise rests on a moral condition. We have to be ready not just to believe, but to obey. We must be prepared to do God's will when he makes it known.

I remember a young man coming to see me when he had just left school and begun work in London. He had given up going to church, he said, because he could not say the Creed without being a hypocrite. He no longer believed it. When he had finished his explanations, I said to him, "If I were to answer your problems to your complete intellectual satisfaction, would you be willing to alter your manner of life?" He smiled slightly and blushed. His real problem was not intellectual but moral.

This, then, is the spirit in which our search must be conducted. We must cast aside apathy, pride, prejudice and sin, and seek God in scorn of the consequences. Of all these hindrances to effective search the last two are the hardest to overcome, intellectual prejudice and moral self-will. Both are expressions of fear, and fear is the greatest enemy of the truth. Fear paralyzes our search. We know that to find God and to accept Jesus Christ would be a very inconvenient experience. It would involve the rethinking of our whole outlook on life and the readjustment of our whole manner of life. And it is a combination of intellectual and moral cowardice which makes us hesitate. We do not find because we do not seek. We do not seek because we do not want to find, and we know that the way to be certain of not finding is not to seek.





So be open to the possibility that you may be wrong. Christ may in fact be true. And if you want to be a humble, honest, obedient seeker after God, come to the book which claims to be his revelation. Come particularly to the Gospels which tell the story of Jesus Christ. Give him a chance to confront you with himself and to authenticate himself to you. Come with the full consent of your mind and will, ready to believe and obey if God brings conviction to you. Why not read through the Gospel of Mark, or John? You could read either one through at a sitting (preferably in a modern translation), to let it make its total impact on you. Then you could re-read it slowly, a chapter a day. Before you read, pray—perhaps something like this:



*“God, if you exist (and I don’t know if you do), and if you can bear this prayer (and I don’t know if you can), I want to tell you that I am an honest seeker after the truth. Show me if Jesus is your Son and the Savior of the world. And if you bring conviction to my mind, I will trust him as my Savior and follow him as my Lord.”*



No one can pray such a prayer and be disappointed. God is no man’s debtor. He honors all earnest search. He rewards all honest seekers. Christ’s promise is plain: “Seek and you will find.”

