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# Basic Christianity

*50th  
Anniversary  
Edition*

  
IVP Books

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## Preface to the 50th Anniversary Edition

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EVERY THREE YEARS A MISSION IS HELD IN Cambridge University, and one such took place in November 1952. Invited to be the chief missionary, I knew that my responsibilities would include giving a series of eight evening addresses in Great St. Mary's, the University Church. I also understood that a university mission would present a wonderful if daunting opportunity to lay before the university a systematic unfolding of the gospel, including the divine-human person of Jesus, the significance of his death and the evidence for his resurrection, the paradox of our humanness, made in God's image but fallen and rebellious, the possibility of a new birth into a new life, the challenge of personal commitment and the cost of discipleship.

This foundation outline proved to be the first of fifty university missions, beginning with Cambridge, Oxford, Durham and London, continuing with so-called red brick universities, then crossing the Atlantic for missions in American and Canadian universities, continuing in Australia and New Zealand, and culminating in a number of missions in the universities of Africa and Asia.

Of course the gospel outline developed as it reflected local situa-

tions and as repetition encouraged improvement. But out of this foundational material *Basic Christianity* was born. It has been used worldwide both to lead people from many different cultures and situations to Christ, and to establish young Christians in their faith. For example, a major general wrote: “I was brought to the foot of the cross by your *Basic Christianity* which I was reading (in 1965) at 40,000 feet in an RAF aircraft! I have never ceased to be grateful and have passed on very many copies.” And a young woman wrote that “when I was in the sixth form at school (way back in 1971) I was searching for God, whoever He was, and [for] a life with meaning and purpose. . . . A Christian teacher at school, knowing of my search, lent me *Basic Christianity*. I devoured the book! I was so excited for, even though I had been confirmed, I had never really understood the basic tenets of Christianity. I did not even really understand why Christ died.”

But the publishers and I have naturally wondered how best and most appropriately to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Basic Christianity*.

It was obviously necessary to update the language, not least by use of a modern translation of the Bible, and to respond to sensitivities relating to gender. We are grateful to Dr. David Stone for taking care of these sensitivities. In many ways a new book seemed to be needed, or at least a radical revision of the original. But I feel I have already made my own contemporary statement of the gospel in *Why I Am a Christian* (IVP, 2004) and do not feel the need to write another, even if I could. Besides, *Basic Christianity* is something of a period piece. It reflects the culture of its own day and needs to be allowed to remain itself. We hope and pray that God will use it as he has done in the past all over the world.

I end with the words of a young man who wrote to me in 1988 as follows: “I regard myself as having a somewhat insecure and rootless background. My mother is Brazilian, of Italian extraction, and my father is English. In 1980—still going through a severe adolescence—I

went to Argentina. It was near the end of my time there that I experienced a marvelous change within me. I started to thirst to know the truth, whatever it might be. I read *Basic Christianity* . . . the words seemed to bounce out at me from the page. I felt convinced I'd discovered the truth although as yet I didn't know that Jesus was God and that he was calling me to an intimate relationship with him. It was only later that year when I was back in England . . . that I finally made a personal act of surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ."

*John Stott*

*December 2007*

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## Preface

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“HOSTILE TO THE CHURCH, FRIENDLY TO JESUS CHRIST.” These words describe large numbers of people, especially young people, today.

They are opposed to anything that looks like an institution. They cannot stand the establishment and its entrenched privileges. And they reject the church—not without some justification—because they see it as hopelessly corrupted by such evils.

Yet what they have rejected is the contemporary church, not Jesus Christ himself. It is precisely because they see a contradiction between the founder of Christianity and the current state of the church he founded that they are so critical and hold back. The person and teaching of Jesus have not lost their appeal, however. For one thing, he was himself an anti-establishment figure, and some of his words had revolutionary overtones. His ideals appear to have been entirely honorable. He breathed love and peace wherever he went. And, for another thing, he always practiced what he preached.

But was he *true*?

An appreciable number of people throughout the world are still brought up in Christian homes where the truth of Christ and of Christianity is assumed. But when their critical faculties develop and they begin to think for themselves, they find it easier to discard the religion

of their childhood than to make the effort and investigate whether or not it is true.

Very many others do not grow up in a Christian environment. Instead they absorb the teaching of Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, or ways of thinking that have no room for God at all.

Yet both groups, if and when they read about Jesus, find that he holds a fascination they cannot easily escape.

So our starting point is the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. He certainly existed. There can be no reasonable doubt about that. His existence as an historical figure is vouched for by pagan as well as Christian writers.

And whatever else may be said about him, he was also very much a human being. He was born, he grew, he worked and sweated, rested and slept, he ate and drank, suffered and died like other people. He had a real human body and real human emotions.

But can we really believe that he was also in some sense “God”? Isn’t the deity of Jesus a rather picturesque Christian superstition? Is there any evidence for this amazing Christian assertion that the carpenter of Nazareth was the unique Son of God?

This question is fundamental. We cannot dodge it. We must be honest. If Jesus was not God in human flesh, then Christianity is thoroughly discredited. We are left with just another religion with some beautiful ideas and noble ethics; its unique distinctiveness is gone.

But there *is* evidence for the deity of Jesus—good, strong, historical, cumulative evidence; evidence to which an honest person can subscribe without committing intellectual suicide. There are the extravagant claims that Jesus made for himself, so bold and yet so unassuming. Then there is his unique character. His strength and gentleness, his uncompromising righteousness and tender compassion, his care for children and his love for those at the margins, his self-mastery and self-sacrifice have won the admiration of the world. What is more, his cruel death was not the end of him. It is claimed that he rose again

from death, and the circumstantial evidence for his resurrection is most compelling.

But suppose Jesus was the Son of God—is basic Christianity merely an acceptance of this fact? No. Once persuaded of who he is, we must examine what he came to do. What did he intend to achieve? The Bible's answer is that he “came into the world to save sinners.” Jesus of Nazareth is the heaven-sent Rescuer who we all need. We need to be forgiven and brought into friendship with the all-holy God, from whom our sins have separated us. We need to be set free from our selfishness and given strength to live up to our ideals. We need to learn to love one another, friend and enemy alike. This is the meaning of what we call “salvation.” This is what Christ came to win for us by his death and resurrection.

So is basic Christianity the belief that Jesus is the Son of God who came to be the Savior of the world? No, it is not even that. To accept that he is divine, to acknowledge our need of salvation, and to believe in the effectiveness of what he did for us are still not enough. Christianity is not just about what we *believe*; it's also about how we *behave*. Our intellectual belief may be beyond criticism; but we have to put our beliefs into practice.

What then must we do? We must commit ourselves, heart and mind, soul and will, home and life, personally and unreservedly to Jesus Christ. We must humble ourselves before him. We must trust in him as *our* Savior and submit to him as *our* Lord; and then go on to take our place as loyal members of the church and responsible citizens in the community.

This is basic Christianity, the theme of this book. But before we start by looking at the evidence for Jesus Christ being divine, we need to pause in order to reflect on the right approach to take. The Christian claim is that we can find God in Jesus Christ. Examining this claim will be much more straightforward when we realize, first, that God is himself seeking us and second, that we must ourselves seek God.