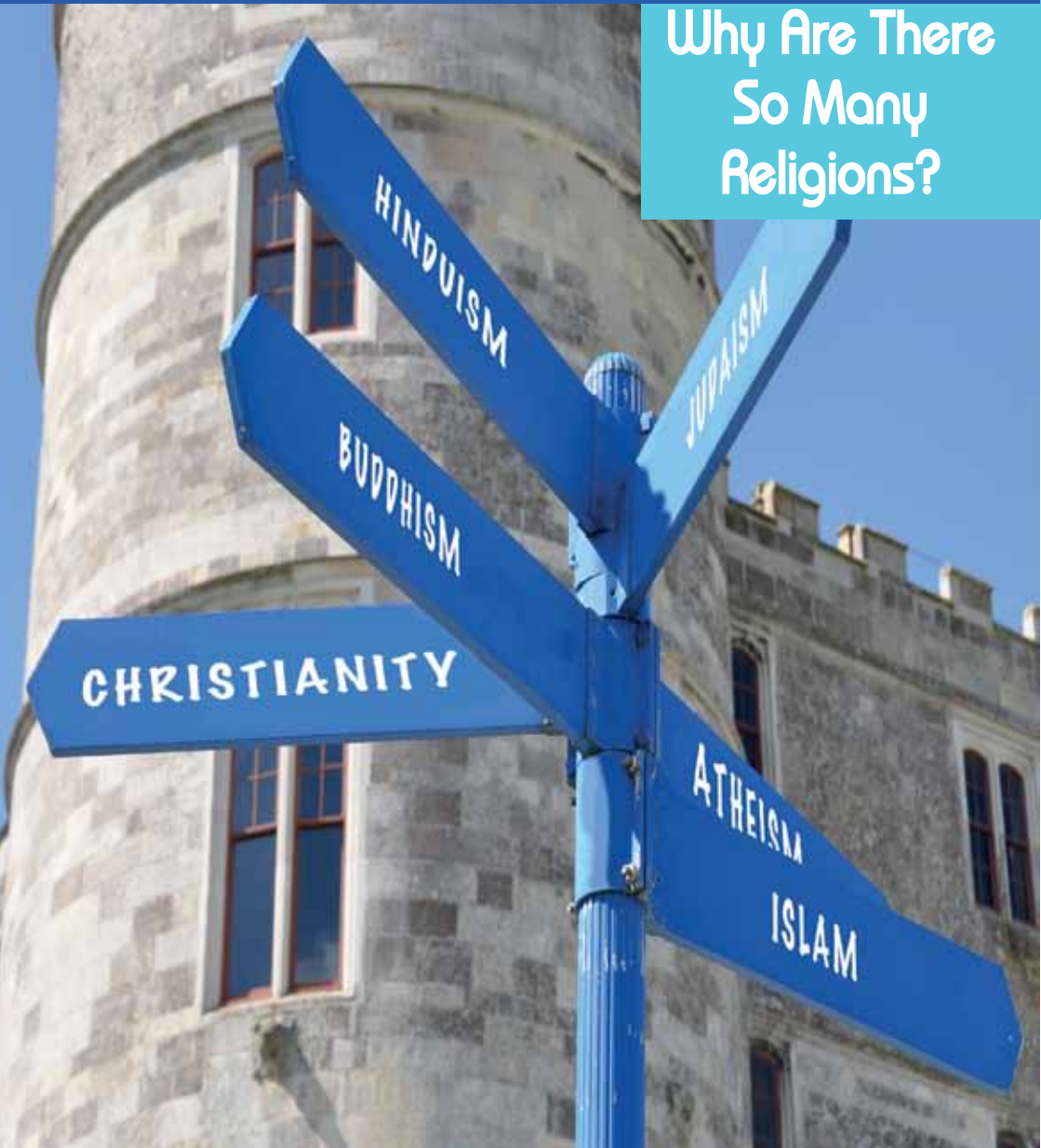


The Contender

The magazine of Edmonton Baptist Chapel

**Why Are There
So Many
Religions?**



“Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.” 2 Corinthians 5:20

“I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” Jude verse 3



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The Contender is produced by the church at Edmonton Baptist Chapel. We are an independent Baptist church who hold to the historic evangelical Christian faith.

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY RELIGIONS?

THE QUESTION will probably lead you to think of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism and perhaps a few more, and yes, they are religions. However, the term religion is broader than that. Perhaps a definition will help here: A religion is a life-defining system of believed truths. Or if we wanted to put this in a simpler way we could say that it is completing the sentence: “I believe in ...” Of course, that may very well change so that one may come to say, “I used to believe ... but now I believe ...” The point I am trying to make is this, everyone is religious; everyone has a religion they follow. Even an avowed atheist like Professor Richard Dawkins has a religion, though he denies it. In a debate he had with John Lennox the more Dawkins tried to deny having faith, the deeper the hole he dug for himself – fortunately for him that particular interaction and exchange was interrupted and moved on. Lennox was seeking to illustrate that the Christian faith is not a blind faith.



Why the need to worship?

How do we account for this religiousness? Wherever you go, whatever civilization, culture, and age – you find this almost universal religious bent in man – man is a worshipping creature. There is obviously something in man – we might call it a desire, awareness, need or even an instinct – something innate in man’s makeup that urges him to worship, that is to adore, admire and pay homage to something or someone of great

worth and value. The Bible says that this religious instinct is something God has placed in man, that He has set eternity in our hearts, (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We instinctively know that there is more to us than flesh and blood, that there is a spiritual dimension, something, Someone over and above us – outside of us. It's one of the reasons we have a longing to know why we are here, the purpose of life, and so on. We instinctively know a sense of responsibility and accountability beyond others and ourselves.

The point is that man is a worshipping creature and there is this need to express it, we need to worship, and so we find ourselves designing ways that we think will satisfy this need; we invent systems, come up with ceremonies and all manner of elaborate rituals – regardless of whether they lead us to actually know God. So down the centuries man has devised and come up with numerous gods and begun numerous religions. He has made images of stone and other materials. He has had his paintings and statues that are revered and bowed down to – but why? What rational explanation is there for bowing down and ascribing deity to objects that have no life and that man has created and made? Why chant endlessly, perform elaborate rituals, participate in complicated ceremonies if they never actually bring any real sense of the presence

of God, any definite evidence of His power, or any real answers to the requests or prayers we have made?

Cost effective religion

The answer is, because it suits us, it is convenient. What better solution to our worshipping instinct than to have a god of our own making – while ignoring the true God who, because He and His ways are inconvenient to us, we do not want. It allows us to some extent satisfy that instinct to worship while allowing us to do so in a way that is both convenient and cost effective. It is a religion of convenience that allows me to get on with my life without too much cost and few demands. But someone might object, “But some religions and beliefs are costly and involve considerable personal sacrifice.” But of course, that too is convenient in that it boosts my self-worth and bolsters up my pride to think, “I can contribute; I can do something – look at me.” So it's even more convenient and satisfying because I don't have to jettison pride and self-worth, in fact my own god and system encourages me to increase them. Even the Christian religion has, by many, been changed and adapted into that which is convenient and involving little or virtually no cost. Rituals and ceremonies have been added to it so that it is hardly recognisable. Unlike the true Bible religion this



I don't think so. Reports I have heard back over the years indicate that even though the vast majority of people were unknown to them the mourners were assured the deceased was a good person and was now in Heaven. Well that is a convenient Christianity for sure – convenient and very profitable for such ministers, but a long way from Bible Christianity.

form, this adaptation is like many of those films based on books, the kind that leave you saying, “It was nothing like the book. So much was left out and so much more that was not in the book added. They have taken incredible liberties”.

When I first became a Pastor I was quickly called upon to take a funeral service. I soon learned that there were some ministers who were fully booked in this regard as they seemed to spend most of their time in the crematorium and cemetery chapels making considerable money every 20 minutes or so. Did they ever speak of sin, the need for repentance when they were in their own churches? Did they speak of death and after that the judgement?

Why so many religions?

So why are there so many religions? Because by designing our own, we hope to satisfy the need to worship while still retaining the right to live as we please with little inconvenience to ourselves. We retain our independence and self-determination and at the same time deal with the worship need that cries out within us. We create our own god to satisfy the need to worship and live as we want and do as we please, for the most part. If we can come up with, or find a religion that seems to satisfy this worship need while leaving us free to continue with our life, with little or no change – what a great religion! We will not have to give up our selfish lifestyle,

turn our back on our sins – and we certainly do not have to submit to our Creator and recognise His sovereign rights over us. No! My human rights trump God's rights every time. And even if we should, amidst our self confidence and self assurance feel fearful, apprehensive, even scared about the future and want a religion that can take away the fear of death and give me some security beyond the grave – even

one that gives me an endless cycle of chances until I get it right – if there is a religion that can

somehow do that we would expect it to have many subscribers, and we might sign up ourselves. After all, it would be convenient, cost little and provide eternal security. Compared to quietening fears and eternal security what is giving some money to a good cause, going to a church once in a while, showing some support to charities? As long as I feel safe and secure such “sacrifices” are nothing – and meanwhile my life will not have to change one bit.

So there is this worshipping need and man has come up with various religions that quieten that internal voice to some extent, provide us with a sense of security for the future but for the most part it doesn't require us to change. No wonder there are many religions. It reminds

me of the Apple App store and their advertising, “You want to do this...there's an app for that.” So long before Apple we have come up with, “You want to quieten the need to worship and still do what you want – there's a religion for that.” Please don't misunderstand me. I am not suggesting religious people are not sincere – but being sincere is not enough. It is not what matters. We can be sincerely wrong,

can't we? Truck loads of sincerity will not make something that is wrong, right or something

“Isn't there some truth in all religions?”

false, true. Of course I am familiar with the objection, “Isn't there some truth in all religions?” But just a minute, even if that is true is that good enough? Let me illustrate this point. Imagine you went to your G.P. and said to him, “I have had this terrible cough and constriction in breathing. I really began to think this was something serious, serious enough to bring my life to an end. But then I was reading Readers Digest and an article about this woman with symptoms like mine and I came to realise that all I needed was a course of antibiotics. What do you think?” To which the doctor replied, “I think there is some truth in what you've said.” Would you be happy with that? What bit, or bits, were the true bits?

Does it matter when all religions have the same destination?

Even to the casual investigator all religions cannot possibly be true. It simply cannot be, “different strokes for different folks.” They cannot all be different paths leading to the same destination, to God. Why not? They are so very different and often so contradictory. And, as we have seen, so many have been designed by us so that we are not inconvenienced.

Here are a few examples. You tell me if they bear any resemblance. One religion says there are many gods and we will become gods – in fact, God was once as we are now. Then another religion teaches that there is no personal God and God is in us all and everything is God. And finally another religion teaches that the Creator could not possibly enter into His own creation, that He cannot do what we say He cannot do. I think you will agree the snapshot of just those three reveals how incompatible and different they are to each other. And how can these possibly be considered anything like Bible Christianity that teaches that God is Spirit, that He is eternal and infinite, but personal. He is outside and over time and space. He is the only self-existing Being and all that exists has been created and is sustained by Him. He is holy and just and knows all things and brings all things to pass according to His sovereign wisdom and will. The Bible teaches that we

are a world of rebellious creatures, willingly and knowingly rebelling against our God’s perfect and good rule and government. Our rebellion has put a great gulf between God and us; we are separated by our sin (lack of conformity to His right and good law), and that as a result we are rightly and justly condemned by His law; we are guilty and liable to just punishment. Even so, God with infinite love has made a way to bridge that gulf and deal with our sin. He has come in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, entered into His own creation in order to take the punishment due to us so that He can freely forgive us. He urges us to own up to our sin and to cry out to Him for forgiveness and reconciliation. Bible Christianity teaches that we cannot make our way back to God, we have no desire to do so and our sin causes us to be helpless and hopeless, but God has reached down to us in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. He came to seek and save us.

“Why would God give us such mixed and contradictory messages?”

Or we can approach this from another perspective. Why would God give us such mixed and contradictory messages? Why would

He place bits of truth all over the place in many religions? Knowing man as He does, why would He have any confidence in us that we could decipher and discover what was true and what wasn't and then assemble all the true pieces together to end up with a finished jigsaw of truth? Why, some of us struggle with ordinary jigsaws with picture on the box lid, and others of us struggle to assemble an IKEA piece of furniture with instructions and diagrams. No, there has to be one true religion.

The true religion

So there must be one true religion but that still leaves us with the question as to how we can know that true religion. Here are a just a few ways to know.

First of all the true religion will be a revealed religion, a teaching that doesn't come from the mind of man but straight from God Himself. This should be obvious to us if we are prepared to think about it. If there is a God who has created this world and universe He must be very different to us; He must be of a substance outside and beyond our own. As I have said, the Bible teaches that God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal; that He is

outside and over time and space. How could it be possible that we physical, finite and limited creatures could grasp and comprehend so great a Being? How can we, we who struggle to understand things on earth, how can we possibly take in eternity? Surely, if there is a Creator God He would not expect human beings to do what is impossible. Instead He would speak into their world describing and revealing Himself and tell us how we might find and know Him. The one true religion will be the one where God does this; it will be a revealed religion. This is what the Bible claims to be. From cover to cover it claims to be God speaking, and it is all written from God's point of view.

The Bible reveals God. It speaks of God entering into His own world. When the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God came into the world then God's principle of revealing Himself was complete.



And then *secondly*, if as the Bible claims it is God's revelation, Him speaking into our world, we would expect it to have an air of divineness about it. We would expect any prophecies, or predictions to be 100 percent accurate – after all God would not only know what was going to happen He would ensure it happened according to His sovereign will and purpose. And that is exactly what we find with the Bible. There are, for example, dozens of prophecies concerning the coming into the world of Jesus Christ and every one of them is completely accurate – and some were given hundreds of years before He came.

And then *thirdly*, staying with the Bible, if this is God speaking into His world and making Himself known and teaching us how we might seek and find Him, we would expect the Bible to be unique in other ways. So for example, even though it contains 66 books written over some 1600 years and 60 generations by 40 plus writers coming from different backgrounds and so on, yet the continuity is “out of this world.” They spoke on countless controversial subjects with harmony and continuity. There is one main message – that man has sinned and is in rebellion against His Creator and God has provided a way whereby He can be both just and holy as well as merciful and forgiving.

The Bible accurately conveys the thoughts and desires of the God who defines all ultimate truth. We have an objective, exact, unchanging measure by which to define absolutes and make value judgements. Only Christianity makes such a claim, that there is a comprehensive, fully sufficient revelation by which God addresses us, and with authority.

And *lastly*, you will know the true religion where there is a church that speaks from the Bible. It will not be concerned with entertainment, shows and performances. It will not seek to flatter and give some phoney sense of safety while avoiding the problem of your sin and need of conversion. It will be speaking from God's point of view and pressing all to repent and seek Him.

You will know the true religion by the results. It will not be a dead and lifeless religion, there will be all the signs of life. It will be obvious that the power of God is in that place. It will be a church where people of all ages seek and find the Lord in a real, personal and felt way. They will speak of conversion, of God intervening in their lives – not just attending church and doing things for the church. The people will speak of their lives being totally changed, regardless of their background and age, of knowing the Lord and His power and guidance.

The true is obvious

In the true religion, Bible Christianity, it is all about being reconciled to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. This is no imaginary, convince yourself of something that isn't real thing, it is a real experience. A person has questions and a sense of emptiness and need. It may be they have been seeking to cure the emptiness by seeking wealth or indulging in pleasures and entertainment – even being involved

punishment for rebellious sinners.

In genuine Biblical Christianity the sincere seeker who trusts Christ to forgive and convert him experiences God's wonderful intervention in his life. This is unmistakable. He is changed by God and knows he has been converted. Old sinful desires and ways are replaced with new ones. He finds he has a great love for the Lord and a genuine desire to talk of Him and serve Him. The true religion is so obvious – the



results speak for themselves and often friends find it hard to believe that this person could be such a different person – changed for the better.

The real is obvious. If I used my computer and printer to produce

in religion – but it has remained. There follows a realisation that they are cut off from their holy God and are sinful in His sight. This sense of sin and longing for forgiveness causes them to really and earnestly seek Him and His forgiveness. They come to understand that forgiveness is possible because the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, had Himself taken the

a £10 bank note and then placed it alongside a real one it wouldn't take an expert to easily recognise the genuine one. With the true religion it is even more obvious and clear. You must want the genuine, living faith and that begins with the matter of forgiveness and conversion to the Lord God. Anything else is at best an imitation. Only this is real and genuine.

FROM EDMONTON TO CHRIST

“GOD DOES not exist” That was the creed of my early teenage years.

I was born in Edmonton, but then grew up south of the river. My teenage atheism was in many ways a rebellion against the rather shallow church background of my childhood (Sunday school, some trips to the local Church of England in Plumstead). I thought of God as a boring irrelevance.

Thinking schoolboys!

For some reason, completely unrelated to any religion, I, and a couple of school-friends became hugely interested in the great questions of ethics and morality. People ought to be good, not evil. But what are good and evil? I remember we spent a good deal of thought (for teenagers) drawing up lists of virtues and vices: good qualities in one column, bad ones in the other.

This had an unexpected effect on me. I began to think seriously about the whole nature of “goodness”. It



seemed pretty clear that the claims of goodness applied to everyone. No matter what (for instance) a Nazi might say about the holocaust, it could never be morally right to treat other people so cruelly. Or if someone willingly laid down his life to save the innocent, no one could call that “evil”.

Where did this universal authority of goodness come from, I wondered? If goodness was going to have any real meaning or authority, it could hardly be something we just made up for ourselves. If it was, then a Nazi could just as well claim righteousness for his perverted morality, as a decent person could for his. No, morality had to have some superhuman origin. It isn't something we make up; it calls to us from beyond ourselves.

God comes back into view

In a quite unforeseen way, my thoughts about moral goodness had led me back to God. He now came back into view as the supreme authority that lay behind the “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not” of human conscience. I learned to revere Him as the Good One – the source of moral values.

But He was very different from the God I remembered from my Sunday school childhood. *That* God I still despised as a piece of silly superstition. In my new moral religion, there was no room for prayer or miracles.

I soon learned that this was not enough. Life was a war between good and evil, right and wrong. And that war was not some far-off thing. It was inside me; it touched my whole personal life. My

conscience rebuked me for some of the things I did. I knew what temptation and defeat were. How could I ever get out of the moral quicksand by my own puny efforts?

Help from the Screwtape Letters

I now began praying to God to help me to resist temptations, to become a better human being. A book I read at this time, which was decisive in encouraging me to do this, was *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis. In this book (I confess I didn't realise how famous it was when I read it), Lewis paints a colourful and insightful picture of the moral and



spiritual life, the conflict between the powers of light and darkness to win one human soul. I found it a totally convincing picture. The man in the book, tugged this way and that by his vices and virtues, tempted by the seductive ploys of Screwtape, helped along the better path by God - that man was me.

Who is Jesus Christ?

It was reading *The Screwtape Letters* that set off a new train of thought in me. C.S. Lewis often spoke about Christ. So where exactly did Christ fit into things? I could hardly deny that He must have been an agent of good. I remember being stunned by the moral beauty and purity of the Sermon on the Mount. Undoubtedly Christ was an impressive teacher and example of goodness. But was He more? Reading some other pieces written by Lewis, I became increasingly aware that Christianity claimed a lot more for Christ than just "a good man, a great teacher". Christians claimed that He was

the Son of God: that in some sense, He was divine as well as human.

That claim probably means little these days. The New Age movement has taught us that all of us are divine. But it was clear to me that Christianity meant something very different. After all, Christianity arose out of Judaism. Jesus was a Jew. All the first Christians were Jews. And the most basic belief of Judaism was that God and the universe were not the same. God was the infinite Creator; the universe was His finite creation. Human beings, although loved and valued by God, were not

infinite or eternal, but frail children of dust and time.

So how, in the very heart of Judaism, could there have sprung up a faith which believed that a particular Jew - Jesus of Galilee - was in fact divine as well as human? Deity in human form, God in flesh? Those first Christians were not New

Agers. They did not believe in the divinity of all persons. Yet they worshipped this Man Jesus as divine.

Reading and thinking about such things, still with C.S. Lewis as my chief guide, I soon found



myself accepting the Christian view of Christ. It seemed to make eminent sense of His person, life, and impact. I don't say I was as clear about it then as I was afterwards; my understanding of the deity of Christ was to get a lot sharper and deeper. But I embraced the essence of the matter: Jesus was more than merely human. In Him, God had visited our world in person.

So far, but not there yet

At this point, you could say that I had pretty much become a Christian in my head. My beliefs were largely Christian. But it hadn't yet penetrated into my heart, my will. That came a bit later. It happened when I seriously explored, for the first time, the meaning of Christ's death. I suppose up until then, I had seen the cross as an example of courage and martyrdom: Christ being ready to die rather than renounce the Gospel He proclaimed.

But a closer exposure to Christian teaching led me to understand that the Bible meant far more than this, when it asked me to have faith in Christ crucified. The Bible spoke about God's judgment on sin. God is love, but His love isn't the spineless sentimentality that often passes itself off as "love" today. God's love is a pure and holy love. He doesn't just shrug His shoulders at our sins; He won't brush them under the carpet. The purity and holiness of His love move Him to judge us, to call us

to account, for our disobedience to His eternal moral values.

What Jesus Christ had secured

When Jesus Christ submitted to the cross, I now learned that He was revealing to us, in His own flesh, the seriousness of God's verdict on our sin. On the cross, Christ was lovingly drinking *our* cup of judgment. So when I look at the crucified Jesus, I have to say, "That is what my sins deserve. I ought to experience death in body, death in soul, for my rejection of God. And yet here is Jesus Christ, God incarnate, submitting to my death, embracing the verdict I've earned. Now risen from the dead, He asks me to trust Him, to rely on His death, so that God's mercy and salvation can flow upon me without making light of my guilt. All my sins have been judged in the cross. Now the risen Christ brings me into God's life-giving presence and favour."

It was when I saw the cross in this way that faith first penetrated from my brain into my will. Awed by God's justice, melted by His love, I yielded myself to the crucified Saviour. Shortly afterwards I joined the worshipping community of the church, and was baptized. I've been in that community ever since, and continued to find Christ there, living among His people. Will you come and discover Him for yourself?

ONE IN A BILLION!

HAVING lived in London for nearly two years, I can't help wondering what many of the people who speak about overcrowding and the rises in population would make of India. It would come as something of



a shock for anyone who has never been to India to suddenly come face-to face with a real population of now over 1 billion people (second only to China to cross the 1 billion mark) and still rising. That would be just the start of surprises. For as the unwary travels from state to state he will be amazed to see the cultural and religious diversity which coexist, in relative harmony, throughout this wide stretched nation. Even for an Indian like myself, when travelling to my neighbouring states I find myself in the midst of foreign languages. There are about 1630 dialects and that is beside the 33 major languages spoken across the length and breadth of the land. One does wonder how India with all its diversities holds together as

a nation. It could be the Indian psyche, which has taught countless generations to revere men who hold different religious ways of life.

No assurance

In India, Hinduism is the major religion. This is a pantheistic religion – believing in many gods. Interestingly but not surprisingly it has no dogmas. A person can even believe what they want without ceasing to be a Hindu. This enables many to be convinced that they are religious people, even though they don't understand the Sanskrit religious recitals uttered by the priests.

Hinduism does not give any assurance to its followers about salvation and heaven (moksha). It



is a religion of endless hope and even after death the last rites are considered important for the souls to be released. Achieving liberation of the soul from this vain body is the ultimate aim of this belief. However the path to this is to mortify the body to the exclusion of all pleasure or enjoyment. It is a path of misery all along until liberation through death is achieved (obtained), when one might then end up as a lower creature in the next birth – and so the cycle of births continues.

Pessimism

We are surrounded by confusion as regards to what sin is. Is this any wonder when we consider the salvation that Hinduism offers? The way to heaven is left entirely to the whim of interpretation of every individual. Fate, feelings, fortunes – sprinkled with auspicious days – are part and parcel of our culture. Above all, Hinduism advocates castism in all its forms, which is supposed to lead people to live in harmony. However, the results of such beliefs can be seen all around us, with newspapers full of pessimistic ideas, and corruption prevailing in all walks of life.

Message of hope

When Christian missionaries came to India, they brought the message that Jesus Christ, the true son of God, came into this world to deliver men and women from meaninglessness and misery and of trusting their own ideas for salvation. They taught that Christ had gained salvation from sin for His people by paying sin's penalty in suffering on the Cross of Calvary. Heaven cannot be gained by observing days and events or by doing good, or leading a life of poverty and denial. If a person turns to Jesus Christ in true repentance and faith their sin will be freely forgiven and they will look forward to eternal life. Furthermore, such a transformation could be experienced here in this life.

Proof of the message

Many people wanting to escape the oppression of higher castes professed themselves to be Christian, including many of my relatives. But God's grace worked in my grandfather's life and he became a true Christian. Although he was a Hindu priest in a small village, he renounced all his Hindu beliefs and followed the Lord.



The people who knew him were waiting to see the consequences of this act. They expected the deity he was serving to make life very difficult for him. On the contrary, as days progressed, they could see the way he was enjoying peace and happiness in believing the Lord Jesus Christ. Though uneducated, the way he guided his children and his sincerity in his daily duties made people respect him. Some people even started enquiring about the difference between the old life and his new-found faith. My grandfather was able to explain that he had true communion with God and the assurance of knowing Him as a Father in Heaven.

Good news still

Long after missionaries have left India, God is still reaching out to its people. Because my grandfather was a committed Christian, I was privileged to be brought up under Christian influences and heard the Gospel many times as a young person. Time and again through the preaching I heard that I was a sinner, far away from the holy God who is going to judge the world. There are no good works that I can do to alter this condition. But there is a way provided by the One who said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no man comes to the Father but by me." He is truly the Person He claimed to be – the Son of God

and Saviour of sinners. He is the only way that God has appointed, in His mercy to needy sinners, to come to Him. If we come in true repentance, He has promised to forgive and restore the lost relationship with God the creator of the whole universe and me.

A personal response

Despite the privilege of a hearing this message preached many times, it was not until I was 14, while attending a Christian youth camp, that I was really made aware of my condition away from the true God. The Gospel message of salvation hit me hard. Realising I was a guilty sinner, I trusted Jesus Christ for my salvation in true repentance and received the assurance from His Word that I was now His child. The joy flooded into my heart and the love I had for the Lord grew stronger and stronger as I read and obeyed his Word the Bible, and prayed. This, in contrast to what my Hindu ancestors had been experiencing.

The only way, the only Saviour

The religions of this world teach that you have to earn salvation, but all your life you are striving without any guarantee of

gaining it. True faith is based on what Christ has done on Calvary's cross for me, dying on my behalf. The free invitation He gives on that basis is – repent of all your sins and believe on Him alone for salvation. This is what millions of people around the world have done. I am glad to follow Him and know that I will never have any regrets.

After being involved for a while in young people's work, I was called to pastor my church in 1991. This church was founded by Baptist missionaries some fifty years ago and has about 75 members. We reach out to the nearby tea estates on a weekly basis. We pray that the community around, some 20,000, will be reached with the wonderful gospel of Jesus Christ.



‘INCH-ALLAH!’ (IF GOD WILLS)

Numbering our days

“Come now, you who say,
“Today or tomorrow we
will go to such and such a
city, spend a year there, buy
and sell, and make a profit”;
whereas you do not know
what will happen tomorrow.
For what is your life? It is
even a vapor that appears for
a little time and then vanishes
away. Instead you ought to
say, “If the Lord wills, we shall
live and do this or that.””

Have you ever thought about the meaning of life? What is its purpose? Is there a goal? Our life is a journey. It may be long, it may be short, but we have only one lifetime to live. Nabi Musa (Prophet Moses) knew about this when he wrote the following:

*So teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
Psalm 90:12*

He knew there was more than just this life, that death – the great enemy of man – will separate us from it. Because there is life after death we must be wise and seek to apply such wisdom in order to make sure we know where we will spend Eternity.



Prince of fools

Allow me to illustrate the importance of serious thinking on this matter.

One day a great and wealthy Prince summoned all the clowns and troubadours. He told them to perform their best routines, make fun, and seek to cause the people to laugh. The incentive placed before them was that he would then choose a Prince of Fools and present him with a special crown and sceptre. One after another performed their routines. Finally the Prince gave the best all round performer the coveted crown and a sceptre. He is now the Prince of fools and chief over all the others.

Soon afterwards the Prince became very ill and the newly

crowned clown came to visit him. Sitting before his master he asked:

“Your majesty, how are you feeling?”

“Very bad,” the Prince replied, “the doctors say that I may die soon.”

“Oh!” said the clown, “I am sure they will do everything to make you better, but let me ask you a question – are you ready to face death and what lies beyond?”

“No,” the Prince replied, “I was always too busy enjoying this life to think about that.”

“But Master,” said the clown, “I remember that when you travelled you always sent heralds before you to prepare the cities and places you were going to and yet for this important and crucial journey you haven’t made any preparations? I thought I was the best and funniest clown in your kingdom; you gave me a crown and sceptre but I must give it back because you must surely be the Prince of Fools for I have never been so foolish and silly.”

It’s just an illustration but the same thing is happening in people’s lives today. They are so busy and anxious about this world and this life that they forget to think and concern themselves with the most important – their Creator and what lies beyond this present world and life.

Remote and distant?

So many people are still like before I came to know the living God through Jesus Christ. In those days God seemed remote to me, far away, unconcerned, and not wanting to be involved with people. I was afraid and scared to call upon His Name. I only knew the negative things about God – who He is not. But we are in desperate need to know positively Who is God, and not simply what He is not. Is this possible?

Please allow me to share my testimony with you because I want to express how grateful I am to God who saved me by His wonderful grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Isa Almasih).

My testimony can be summed up in one sentence: “the book I had burned came back and burnt my heart.”

No Western religion for me

Coming from a fundamentalist,



but not radical or extremist, Islamic background, I had only learned about the negative side of Christianity. Christianity is so confused with Westerners that everything which is non Arabic, and not from the Islamic culture, must be avoided.

To start with there was school. Because education was western it was considered to be, and associated with, a disbelief in the Religion of Islam, (it was thought that every Westerner was a Christian, but I know now that it is not true). At school, no one was allowed to speak in his mother-tongue. My parents did everything possible to keep me from school and I was to become a shepherd wandering in the Sahara desert. However, one day I was caught by soldiers and personally escorted to ensure that I registered at the local school. On hearing the news my father tried to compensate by increasing his control over my life by sending me to learn the Koran in Arabic after school. The funny thing was that you learned and recited without knowing the meaning. Only the pronunciation was important: no one must mispronounce the Word of Allah (as my language, Tamasheq, is related to Arabic in its phonetics, it was quite easy for me). I learned the Koran through a rote memorization. I gave myself to both sides – education and Islam (which for the most of the time was just to please my father). I never skipped any

prayer, even the hardest one early in the morning. My father would wake me up because it is believed that early morning is the time when God opens the windows in heaven and then good luck will do the rest.

A question or two

As I progressed in my education I had to move to higher schools and face different realities. I, who had always believed that there was only one religion on this earth, now had to learn about Christianity, evolution and other philosophies. Facing these new things I started to question my own religion, something which Islam forbids. As time passed I became very worried about life after death. I had many questions: What will I reply to the angel who will be pressing me in the tomb asking: “mi rabbu-ka?” (Who is your master, Devil or God?) “Will I go to heaven?” Inch-Allah (if God will) was the only thing I was sure about. As one of the Sahab (friends of the prophet) said, “if only I could be bird in order not to think about my sins”.

The burning question

According to Islam every one has 2 angels, one on each side. One writes the good deeds and the other writes the sins. On the Day of Judgment, your shoulder blades will be your mouth and they will speak on your behalf. I was really scared of this Mizzan Al Haqq (Balance of truth) and very confused. I tried more religion, then I had cigarettes or

alcohol, and to find peace of mind I even joined a music band. Some friends persuaded me to smoke marijuana and very soon things were out of control as the sacred mingled with the secular. Things were going from bad to worse. In the traditional Islam it is believed that if you burn even a small part of the Koran, you will become mad. (I deeply believed that). As a result in order to show that the Bible, the book of Ahl Alkitab (People of the Book), was not the word of God, we started to roll our cigarettes and drugs in its thin and light paper. This was something of a challenge to me because when I burned this book nothing happened. I thought: "The Koran is greater".

A challenge that would not go away

Today when I look at my life I can praise God because at the right time His grace met me. In 1982 a cousin came to know Jesus as his personal Saviour. As soon as he discovered the wonderful new life in Jesus, Kalimat-Allah n the Word of God, and knowing about my longing to find God, he came to me and urged me to find the truth. In the Koran, Jesus is just a prophet mentioned by name of his mother Isa Ibnu Maryama, (which is a bit strange for my culture). There is a whole chapter about him but the Koran says: don't make any difference between God's prophets. At the

same time, he is called Ruah-Allah (Sprit of God) and the Holy Child. I didn't want to listen to anything but staying with my cousin I would often hear him praying to God in our mother tongue. I was amazed because in Islam you are only allowed to pray in Arabic – in heaven everybody will speak Arabic. His prayers though were intelligible and I even heard my name in them. I was impressed and thrilled. At that time, my life was empty and depraved but God had pity on me.

A personal and gracious Word

One morning I found a New Testament on my cousin's table. I picked it up just to fill the time, but instead I found a new life because Jesus spoke and called to me through Matthew 11:28:

"Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

The word "come" was pressed upon my heart. This is what really broke my heart and I couldn't escape anymore. I had to stand up as if I was meeting Him. Words can't describe my feelings but at that particular time I knew something had changed my life and things had become new. I realized what a burden I had. I felt the weight of my sins.

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

By His grace God made the persecution by my parents and relatives less. In Islam if someone changes faith he becomes a dog and the dog is an unclean animal – not to be touched. They couldn't deny what God had done in me. In fact from the beginning He was at work.

God was willing to show me mercy

Today without Inch-Allah I am able to say that I am going to heaven, not by works of righteousness that I have done through practicing a religion but according to His mercy. God made it clear in Kitab Almuqadas (the Holy Book). He said in Hebrews:

“It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.”

God puts certain conditions on living in paradise. A man has to believe that God exists, that He is his Creator and Saviour whom he should trust.

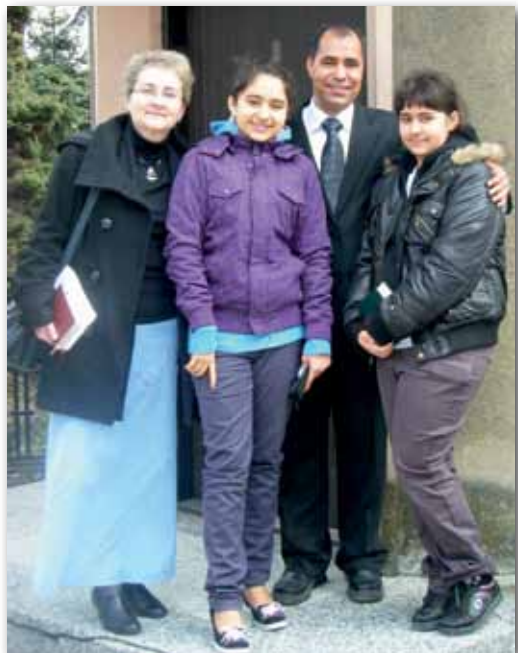
“Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” *Acts 4:12*

In His Word, God has revealed who will go to heaven so that each one of us can be certain, even now, and so not live in fear of the Day of Judgment. There is no mystery about how to have a relationship with God. We have to approach Him not as if He is

only a policeman behind us, but with reverence and honour like a father.

Inch-Allah or certainty

In the light of this, let us not say Inch-Allah about our destiny because by doubting in it, when God both reveals and declares it, we acknowledge our lack of faith. Everything is clear: we are saved by God's grace through faith by the precious blood of Christ – the Lamb of God without spot or blemish. No more sacrifice is necessary. Jesus has done it once and for all. There is a call from God to the sinner, come and seek and find the Lord before it is too late. Having only one life to live, may God help us to spend it for Him and enter because of His great love in Janna (paradise).



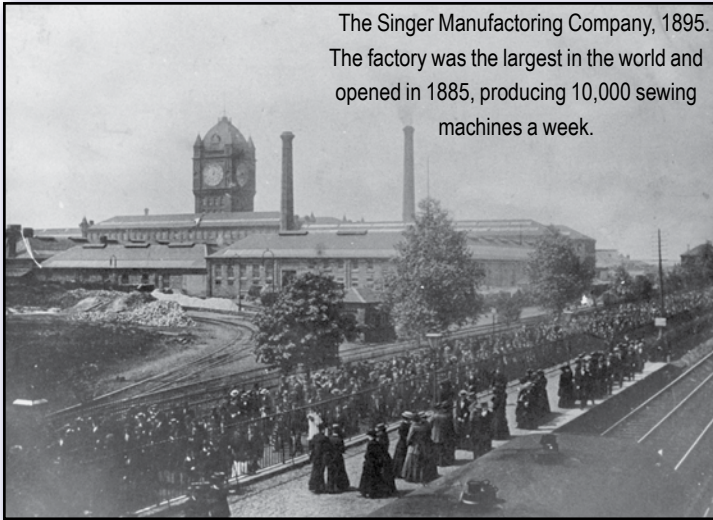
GOING FROM 'THE DEPRESSION' INTO THE JOY

THE CLYDESIDE town of Clydebank was unremarkable in many ways. A grey uninspiring community whose drab tenement houses were built adjacent to the very gates of the massive John Brown's shipyard, which in its heyday built many of the great Ocean liners that sailed the Atlantic from the UK to America. Royalty were often in attendance to officiate at the launch of such imposing vessels as the Queen Mary, the Queen Elizabeth, the Royal yacht Britannia, and warships ranging from Destroyers, Cruisers to some of the most powerful Battleships sailing the oceans. The other great provider of employment in the town was the Singer Sewing Machine factory, which in its glory days had around 20,000 employees in its workforce. In those years, nearly every able-bodied person worked in either the Shipyard or the Sewing Machine factory. The town of around 50,000 inhabitants was almost equally divided religiously speaking between Protestants of a Presbyterian stripe, and Roman Catholics mainly of Irish descent.



Church of Scotland

My own family were of nominal Church of Scotland persuasion although at that time I never knew of one relative who professed to be a true born again Christian. As an infant I was baptised, or christened as we called it in Scotland, which was traditional and fairly widely adhered to by the Protestant population. As I later found out, the practice did nothing to bring any reasonable sense of relationship to God, and perhaps induced a false



The Singer Manufacturing Company, 1895.
The factory was the largest in the world and
opened in 1885, producing 10,000 sewing
machines a week.

Depression, had some part time freelance sports journalism, which enabled us to eke out a living a little better than most of our neighbours in the working class area of the town where we

sense of security to the majority who had received the rite, if indeed they ever had any real recall of the ritual.

The Depression years

I was raised in childhood through what was popularly called the 'Depression,' in the thirties, where employment for the working classes particularly became next to impossible to obtain. There was the tragic sight each day of unemployed shipyard workers crowding around the bowler hatted foremen from the Shipyard, grovelling and humiliating themselves as they begged for some job to enable them to meet the most basic needs of their families. There was no expansive Social Security provision, it was sink or swim with a pathetically meagre form of Means Test in operation. As a family, my father, mother and brother were fortunate in the fact that my father during the awful days of the

lived. I had a sister a year younger than me, who sadly died at the age of four of meningitis, which was the first time with some degree of shock, I realised as a five year old, that we all must die some day. The small white coffin and the retinue of dark clothed mourners leaving for the cemetery in the midst of my childlike perplexity, is an undying memory, that often seem like it happened only yesterday rather than over seventy years ago!

God's intervention in my life

One sunny summer evening in August 1957, I was sitting in the front room of our Council house in Clydebank. As I sat musing on nothing in particular, and certainly not reading the Bible or praying; I had no heavenly angel come to speak to me; no choirs sung sweet Gospel hymns or melodies, nothing special encompassed what was to be the

most dramatic event that would ever overtake my hitherto unspectacular and irreligious life. I was brought up in a loving, moral, but non-Christian family who nevertheless espoused certain virtuous standards, which were to lay a good foundation for my brother and I in later life. And so the sun shone in on a pleasant August summer evening. People were going about their normal business in the early evening.

No birds sang with sweeter song particularly. There was nothing in the natural surroundings to induce a 'religious' ethos. Suddenly, and completely out of the blue as it were, it was as if I heard a clear voice speaking directly to me. There was no audible voice, yet I recognised it as God's voice, and this is what I construed Him to be saying. 'That door leads to heaven, that door leads to hell, you have to make a decision regarding which one you want to pass through!' Perhaps it's not the experience of every sinner who is given the spirit of repentance and faith, but when I arose from my knees that night, having confessed and repented of my sins, I was totally convinced that I was saved, and had an immediate assurance of the fact. When it is considered that I had next to no instruction in Biblical truth, and was not being subjected to any systematic application of God's Word, it was a miracle of grace that I almost instinctively knew that I had to confess this saving experience

to my family and acquaintances. I experienced a sleepless night because I knew I had to go into the office in the morning and testify to my work mates that I had been converted.

A bombshell of an announcement

I was working at this time in a large Building Contractors in the town of Dumbarton on Clydeside, and my job was as an assistant in the Purchasing Department. The office was a large kind of open plan affair with half glass partitions separating some of the sections and around fifty people worked in this area. We were always particularly busy, because four of us plus our boss had about fifty building sites to service and the site foremen of these were continually on the phone pressing for delivery of the various items required in the building process. I arrived at the office having driven about six miles with my mind in a turmoil contemplating the witness that had to be made to my work mates. Having being possessed of a filthy cursing tongue that thought nothing of repeatedly taking the Lord's Name in vain, and being able to engage in all the filthy conversation of the wicked, I was well aware that my bombshell announcement was going to cause more than minor ripples among my colleagues.

Years later, some of those colleagues told me that they did not think my experience would last, but as they saw a remarkable

change in my life, my conversation, my attitude, and diligence in the factory so they had to admit that some great change had taken place, and I was an altogether different individual. I began to slowly grow in Christian experience and came to a place where God challenged me to leave my secure job and launch out to serve Him.

Serving the Lord

I had no desires to be a Minister or Pastor, so I started a small Bible study group in my own home in a Council house and invited young people to come along every Thursday evening. There were five of us including my wife for the first meeting, which continued for over ten years when we regularly had thirty or more young people

crowding out our little front room! From this humble beginning I was eventually enabled by the Lord to establish a Reformed Baptist church, which has now been in existence for over forty years, and many people have been converted and influenced in Biblical things through its ministry. Having also travelled the world to places as diverse as India, South America, Spain, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, and North America, a curriculum that was beyond any expectations I ever had before I became a Christian, I can only testify that God has been exceedingly good to my wife and I in this way.

But greater far than any material blessing, through repentance and faith, and an enabling to trust in the promises of the Word of God, my

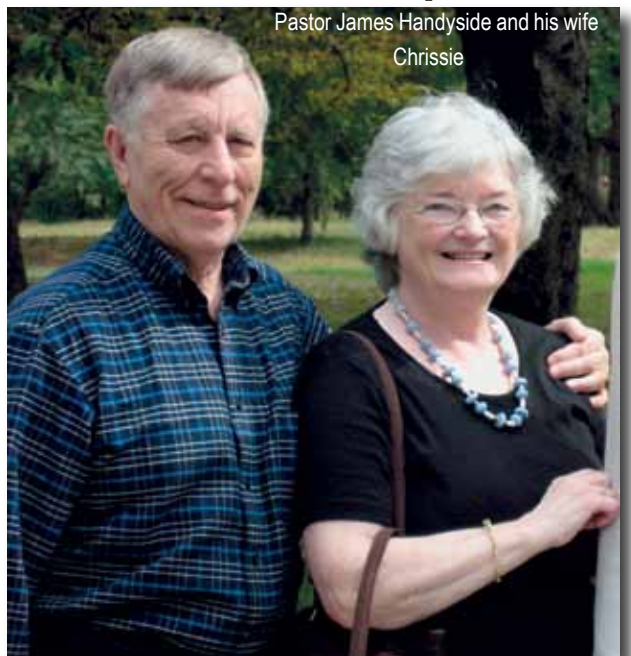


sins have been forgiven and I have a solid hope for eternity. Instead of being consigned to Hell forever, which all who refuse God's gracious offer of salvation justly deserve for sinful disobedience and disinterest in Christ or His Gospel, by God's grace I have been born again and given the concrete promise that on passing from this scene of time, I will be forever with the Lord in the perfection and bliss of the heavenly realm, where all sorrows, grief and sinfulness will no longer exist. What the Lord has done for me, and millions all down through history also, he can do for you if you will confess your sin, repent of your transgressions, and seek by God's grace to live for Him so long as He grants you breath and life on this terrestrial sphere.

How to get to Heaven

Nominal religion, abundance of good works, though reasonably good insofar as they go, yet they will never justify one single sinner on this earth before a thrice holy God. We must surely ponder the question: If any person can get to heaven by doing the best they can, engage in numerous good works, donate time and effort to

commendable Charities, then why did Christ have to suffer such excruciating agony, humiliation, ridicule and hatred to die on a cruel wooden cross on Calvary's hill? It would appear sadistic of God the Father to subject His only Son to such inhumane treatment, when He could have easily inserted a direction in the Bible that said that to do good deeds would ensure eternal life for any who engaged thus. Rather God clearly says exactly the opposite in numerous Scriptures, but one is sufficient at this time to prove the point: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." *Ephesians 2:8, 9.*



Pastor James Handyside and his wife
Chrissie

TRYING IT ALL BUT STILL EMPTY INSIDE

I WAS BORN into a typical Polish family – my parents attended (more or less regularly) the Roman Catholic Church but my mother was a devoted communist, playing an important role in the local Communist Party.

My teenage years were also rather typical. After confirmation, which to me was just another religious ceremony, my bonds with the Roman Catholic Church, and adherence to it became rather loose.

Fascinations

I was fascinated by eastern religions and philosophy – particularly Buddhism and yoga. Having met a group of people who were equally crazy about meditation and chanting mantras I started to meet regularly with them once or twice a week. Other changes to my life followed and I became a vegetarian with the hope that maybe, one day, I would reach nirvana. God was so distant and unknown to me.

After few years, when I was 19 years old, I realised that my life had no meaning. Instead of having a sense of fulfilment, or at



least making progress towards it, there was a kind of emptiness and hopelessness in my life, which I was not able to deal with. There was also a very difficult situation in my family – my father was addicted to alcohol, which brought about lot of conflict, and finally plans for divorce.

Suicidal

I was both weary and discouraged – actually I lost any desire to live. I couldn't see any point in waking up, getting dressed, eating and going to school every day... I didn't



believe in any specific God and felt so lonely, afraid and lost. One day, in the final year of my high school, I determined to commit suicide. I prepared a strong rope and decided to hang myself in the attic.

Another life

However, that never happened because I met three young men who started telling me amazing things about God and the way He can change my life. They were so full of joy and talked excitedly about God all the time. Although they were still in the Roman Catholic Church,

they also attended a Protestant church to which they invited me. I discovered I liked it, so much so that I went again a second time. On that particular Sunday the preaching was about the grace of God. As I listened I felt this was truly God speaking to me, showing me His love, mercy and grace. I realised what a great sinner I was and how desperately I needed to be converted and saved. That Sunday, over 20 years ago, I walked out of that church as a new creature. Jesus forgave my sins, saved me and gave me such a great joy.

Old ways replaced with new ones

Different problems then started in my family. My mother, who hadn't objected to my involvement in yoga and meditation, strongly opposed my dedication to God. Being Polish, it was expected that I remain a Catholic (even if that meant a very bad one). "Changing" religion and "forsaking" my ancestors' church was considered terrible. I tried to speak to my sister about what God had done in my life and what she needed to do to get right with God (though unfortunately not in a very wise way) so we became alien to one another. However, the Lord was working in my family. Two years later my sister and her husband were also converted (their testimony is another story).

For some weeks I attended both the Catholic and Protestant churches, but through reading the Bible I came to realise that in the Roman Catholic church there were so many things that had no foundation in the Bible, they were inventions of men. To remain there would be to compromise and God was so much more important to me than what people thought. So, six months after the Lord had given me a new life and brought me to be a child of His, I was baptised in the way the Bible describes, thus cutting my links with the Roman Catholic church.

No longer empty but fully satisfied

I know that all that, and the years since then, is owing to the wonderful grace of God. It must be grace because I had done nothing to deserve such favour and kindness. If I hadn't met Him (or more accurately, if He had not met me) I would probably not be alive today. He took away my sins, fear, and loneliness; He gave me His peace and a joy and purpose to live.

He filled that emptiness in my life and has shown his blessings so many times and in so many situations. He is also the perfect and loving Father I didn't find in my earthly parent. He is my Saviour and my Lord!



SUNDAY SERVICES

10:30 Gospel Service This service is particularly suitable for everyone, especially first time visitors. It is straightforward and concentrates on our greatest need and how we can seek and find the Lord God.

The very young children, attending with an adult, will have their own special time at Junior church in another room.

17:00 Teaching Service This service of worship concentrates on the systematic teaching of the Bible for those who have personally come to know the Lord.

BIBLE STUDY

19:30 Thursday Our Bible study will usually involve a series of studies, over a number of weeks, in one of the books of the Bible, or on a topic, applying it in a practical way to the life of the Christian.

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Sunday & Monday Depending on their age there will be a meeting for them on either the Sunday afternoon (5-8 year olds) or Monday evening (groups for those 9-17). See our website for further details.



Some of the previous editions of The Contender