

A Plain Man Looks at the Cross

by

LESLIE D. WEATHERHEAD

*An Attempt to Explain, in Simple Language for
the Modern Man, the Significance of the Death
of Christ*

ABINGDON-COKESBURY PRESS

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DEDICATED TO

THE REV. HARRY BISSEKER, M.A.

Formerly Headmaster of the Leys School, Cambridge,
and Tutor at Richmond Methodist Theological College,
University of London; my first tutor in Greek Testa-
ment and Psychology, and still my teacher and friend

IN GRATITUDE AND AFFECTION

Preface

WHEN a friend of mine learned of the title of this book, she said, "The trouble is that the plain man does *not* look at the Cross at all, and cannot be made to do so." I can think of several reasons for this:

1. He is not interested in religion. What is more, he thinks of it as an "interest" in the same category as music, gardening, or even golf. Some people take an interest in these things; others just don't. It doesn't appeal to them. That's that. There's nothing more to be said. He never thinks of religion as of vital importance—quite the most important thing in the world. To regard it merely as an interest which he can "take up" or not is more foolish than to regard his health as merely an interest and to be unconcerned if his loved one or he himself develops a killing disease. But we have not yet found a way of persuading the plain man that religion matters. A true perspective would show us that this is the most urgent task in our program if there is to be any "new world." For a new world needs new men, and new men have to be "born from above." There is no human way of producing them.

2. Many plain men who are interested in religion do not think it is relevant to national and international aims. A few who have experienced moral defeat, and who have lost all hope apart from faith in Christ, realize that the bankruptcy of all our reforms is that we have separated them from that

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power of God which is made available through Christ. That realization is born of their own personal defeat which turned to victory only when they came back to him. But thousands of others, *interested* in religion, willing to give a watered-down brand of Christianity some recognition by occasional churchgoing, or even in the way they live their private lives, do not realize that, of the state as of the individual, it is sheer truth to say, "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it." So the house is wired for electric light and power, and all the gadgets of modern scientific inventiveness and resourcefulness are duly fitted—and very impressive they are—but the house is not linked up with the mains, and is dark and cold. What a world this would be if all the wit of man's devising had, running through its inventiveness, the power and purpose, the supernatural energy of God! As it is, having made our schemes and outlined our plans, we fail because we haven't enough spiritual power to carry out our own planning. We can devise the apparatus, but we are not linked up with the main source of supply. We don't *really* believe in any power except our own. The supernatural is not in vogue. It is old-fashioned to talk of it. We forget that on every new level of achievement man remains too selfish to meet the spiritual cost of his own plans. A new world demands more unselfish service than he has power to meet of himself. He falls away unable to meet the spiritual requirement. He is like a man who plans gloriously and writes out checks to meet the cost of his plans without having enough in the bank to get the checks honored. The world would be paradise already if planning and scheming and scientific resourcefulness were all that is needed. What we need is

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such a spiritual revolution that converted men will, even at cost to themselves, direct man's discoveries only to spiritual ends.

3. Even those who go further turn away from the Cross. Christ as the Teacher of splendid but rather impractical ideals? Yes! Christ the Hero? Yes! Christ the Communist? Yes! Christ the Martyr in a good cause? Christ the Example? Christ the Revealer of the nature of God? . . . The plain man says Yes to all that. But when one uses the word "Saviour," one feels that the plain man reacts as a trader might react if in Britain one offered him francs, or if in France one offered him rupees. The word "Saviour" is not current coin in the verbal country in which his mind lives. He feels at once in a strange country. And this is true of most of our theological terms—atonement, salvation, justification, redemption—one could cite a score.

The average plain man rarely thinks of himself as a sinner needing salvation. He will tell you that he's a pretty decent chap. He is, too. He isn't conscious of many "sins." When he is, he often nobly endeavors to do better. If you used the word "saved," he would ask you, "Saved from what?" And if you said, "Hell," he would think you old-fashioned, frightened by a bogey belonging only to superstitious minds. He doesn't believe in hell. All that, he feels, is gone.

This being so, he doesn't get further with the Cross than believing that a brave man died for a cause he believed in. The Resurrection he strongly doubts, save that, here and there, a belief is held in the spiritual survival of all men, including Christ. If you speak of "communion with a risen Christ," of "union with Christ"—which was the very heart

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of the message preached by the earliest apostles and missionaries of Christianity—then you are out of his mental country at once, and in a land of theological terms which he doesn't understand and which he secretly thinks of as having no meaning at all, save to parsons and theological discussion groups.

The truth is, we have "missed the bus" with the plain man. Miss Dorothy Sayers says that the story of the Cross is "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged," and she rightly accuses the church of making it tame and uninteresting, unconvincing and irrelevant. She herself has succeeded magnificently in making the plain man *feel*, both in radio plays and in her published book, *The Man Born to Be King*.

Somehow we've got to make the plain man *think* again. I have great sympathy with him. I can understand why he has been put off religion and why his mind has been affronted by theories of the Atonement and why he has been reduced to the do-as-you-are-done-by religion which most decent men follow, but which is no religion at all.

Yet I believe:

1. The Christian religion is the fullest revelation of the nature of God that exists. Christ is the clue to God and the solution of man's hardest problem.

2. To be right with God is the most important thing in the world.

3. To be "in Christ"—that is, in vital communion with him—is the only way of being right with God and the only mode of existence that deserves the word "life" at all. In Paul's grand phrase, "Life means Christ to me."¹

4. We are all guilty sinners torn in a conflict between

¹ Phil. 1:21 (Moffatt). See also Gal. 2:20.

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what we ought to be and what we have power to be, and there is no way of solving that conflict except through the saving power of Christ.

5. Unless we tap that power and live that life, no reforms or schemes for a new age will come to anything, and our own lives will sink back into futility and compromise. Middle age and old age will find us disillusioned, dull, dissatisfied, gradually giving up the quest for completeness and fullness of life. We shall have missed the beauty and sparkle and meaningfulness of life, the deep satisfaction in living. We may possess many things and achieve fame, but we shall miss joy and peace, and probably fear death. "I came," said Christ, "that they may have life"—abundantly and forever.

6. The Cross of Christ is the clue both to understanding and to releasing into our lives that saving power, and the Cross is "of a piece" with a ministry of Christ begun "before all worlds," continued in his life on earth, consummated in his death and resurrection, and carried on still to the immeasurable benefit and only hope of mankind.

My own life is such a poor affair, that it may seem to give the lie to my beliefs. Yet I hold them; and because, for me, in the last thirty years a growing light has gathered about the Cross, so that now I can faintly glimpse part of its meaning and significance, and because it is the pledge of that love which is my only salvation from despair—which is another word for hell—I publish these chapters in the hope that readers who have little time for study, but who care and who seek, and who are prepared, not merely to read superficially, but to study these chapters and consult their New Testament as some of its great texts are quoted, may

find some light for their minds, but, more importantly, some ground for their faith, and, most importantly of all, an incentive to surrender again and again to that awesome love of him

who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.

A Questionary has been added in the hope that it may be of service to discussion groups. The six chapters—omitting the first and last—might form the basis of the thinking of a group through Lent and form the intellectual preparation for Easter worship, though I should suggest that a more leisurely discussion would prove more profitable.

I must express gratitude, first and foremost, to a teacher from whom I have learned more about true religion and theology than from anyone else alive or dead—the Rev. Dr. W. Russell Maltby. His pamphlet *The Meaning of the Cross* took me further than half a dozen books I had laboriously studied just after leaving college, and his later book *Christ and His Cross* is, in my opinion, far and away the best exposition of the Atonement that I have ever read. Here at last I found a preacher of scholarly mind who, having read the opinions of others, gave us his own and went on where others stop. I wanted even his book to go a little further still. If it is not presumptuous to say so, I have

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sought to go further in this book. If I have blundered, that is my fault. If I have in any way succeeded, it is largely because of the inspiration I have derived from this beloved teacher.

I would also mention the work of another friend, a theologian of international fame, the Rev. Dr. Vincent Taylor, principal of Wesley College, Headingly, Leeds. He has now completed a trilogy: *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, and *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*. In the closing chapter of his last book Dr. Taylor writes, "The test of a theology is the extent to which, after full investigation, it permits us to describe the Gospel." I am most grateful to these two writers. This represents my main indebtedness. Other books which have contributed to my thought are mentioned in footnotes throughout.

My wife, who has read through the manuscripts of all my books and given me the help of her spiritual insight, has read this and made helpful comments. I am again deeply indebted to my secretary, Miss Winifred Haddon, for unstinted help in preparing this book for the press. Much of the typing and retyping was done by her in circumstances of physical peril, when Hitler's flying bombs were both a daily and a nightly terror. London in the summer of 1944 was no picnic for anyone. Those who had concentrated work to do and who did it are entitled to a special tribute of praise.

LESLIE D. WEATHERHEAD

The City Temple

% The Church of the Holy Sepulchre
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