

# **The Way Home: A Faith for the 21st Century**

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**G. Wright Doyle**

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## Lecture One: Requirements for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Faith

### *Introduction*

#### Worldwide confusion

Last October, I was on the train from Boston, where I had attended a conference, back to my home in Virginia. Sitting next to me was a young man from Taiwan. A graduate from National Taiwan University, he was now working on a Master's Degree in Landscape Architecture at Harvard University. He had long hair and looked very much like an artist. He was very intelligent, and could tell me the names of all the different kinds of trees whose leaves were changing that we saw from the window of the train.

As soon as we took our seats, I began to seek ways of talking with him about Christianity. I told him I had just come from a conference on taking the Gospel to China; that my wife and I had lived in Taiwan almost ten years as missionaries; that I did research on Christianity and Chinese culture. I was hoping he would ask me questions, but he didn't. He just was not interested. After a while, he went to sleep.

When he woke up, I tried a different approach. I asked, "What do young people in Taiwan believe in nowadays?"

"My friends mostly don't believe in anything," he replied. "Those who do have faith are Buddhists; a few are Protestant Christians."

"Do you have any religious faith?" I asked him.

"I am a Catholic. But I don't go to church."

After a long silence, he said, to me, "Actually, all the young people I know are confused and lost. We really don't know the meaning of life or how we should live." We then had a very good conversation about the Christian faith.

In January, on my way to a conference with Chinese biblical scholars in London, I sat next to a young American man who attends university in England in order to be with his girlfriend, who is also a student at that university. She is from Poland, and they had met in the United States. We talked about all sorts of things, and then I asked him the same question, "What are your friends living for?"

He looked at me a long time, seeming to be quite confused, and said, "That's a good question. I don't really know." It was clear to me that he also had no idea of the purpose of his own life, other than to be with his girlfriend.

The conference I attended in London was quite interesting. About fifteen scholars from universities in Mainland China were gathered to talk about how Chinese intellectuals have responded to the Bible over the past 100 years. I learned that some of China's most outstanding

writers and thinkers have been deeply influenced by the story of Jesus, even if they themselves do not believe in him. Several of the scholars at the meeting were not Christians, but they were doing research on the Bible in order to find meaning for their lives and for all of China. They all said that China faces a crisis of faith and meaning, and that many educated people are turning to Christ for the answers.

### **THE NEED FOR FAITH (XINYANG)**

Surely, there is a worldwide crisis of faith as we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Today we are going to think about what sort of faith can give our lives direction, meaning, and hope.

First, let us ask, What is faith? The Bible says that it is the “Conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). We believe in something that we cannot see.

Of course, a really solid faith must be based on some reasons: There must be evidence to support our belief; it must possess some reason and logic; it must somehow agree with our deepest intuition; and it must agree with our personal experience.

Christian faith is not “blind” faith. We are not asking anyone to believe in something that has no evidence to support it; is unreasonable; contradicts our fundamental sense of truth; or completely denies our daily experience.

Why do we need faith?

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many people began to think that we do not need faith. Science, they thought, had disproved the existence of the Christian God, and of course the popular religion was only superstition. But now we see that people all over the world are turning to religion to solve the basic problems of life. Buddhism and traditional Chinese religions are growing in China, as is Christianity.

That is because we cannot operate solely by what we *see*, including science. Many things just don’t present us with proof ahead of time. When I made reservations for my flight to Taiwan, I had to trust the airline company to let me on the plane at the agreed time and place. As the plane took off, I had to believe that it would land safely. There was no proof ahead of time! Likewise, when a young man asks a woman to marry him, he does not know whether she will say, “Yes!” Nor does he know whether their marriage will be a happy one. Science cannot explain what love is, much less give us the love we want.

We cannot operate solely on what we *think*, either. Some things are hard to understand. Love, for example. Who can figure out why two people fall in love? What man can understand a woman when she is upset? What is beauty? Why do I respond to a lovely sunset, a moving piece of music, the gracefulness of a Chinese porcelain vase, or the painting of birds and flowers?

Nor can we operate solely on what we *feel*. Feelings are unreliable, as we all know. You may think that the young man who smiles at you really loves you, until you see him with another girl!

You may believe that your father or mother or wife is angry with you, but perhaps he/she is just having a bad day.

Another problem with feelings is that different people feel differently about the same thing. For a long time, Westerners believed their culture was superior, but Chinese thought that theirs was better! Muslims feel that Mohammed is the only true prophet, but Buddhists and Hindus disagree. Who is right?

Furthermore, we *must* live on the basis of some things which we believe to be true. For example, almost everyone assumes that life has meaning; that actions have consequences; that there is a difference between right and wrong; and that people are important – at least I am important! Faith of some sort is necessary just to face each day.

Even atheism is a “faith.” Those who don’t believe in the existence of God *believe* that there is no God! They cannot prove this conviction. What laboratory experiment has demonstrated that God does not exist? As we shall see later, Darwinism, which claims to explain the world without God, has very serious difficulties as a scientific theory.

Furthermore, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, faith is needed to give purpose for life and to provide power for living every day. We face unprecedented challenges. For example:

The ecological crisis threatens us with disease, lack of resources, and even conflict. We are all affected by the financial crisis, which has, like the damage to the environment, resulted from greed and from governmental foolishness and corruption. Many places of the world are facing political crisis. Mainland China, for example, is run by a government that admits that corruption has made the people very angry. I do not need to tell you of all the international crises that cause war, suffering, poverty, death, and fear around the world.

At least some of the time, we all face personal crises. We are almost all too busy, with little time for deep and loving relationships; for rest and exercise; for seeking God. All sorts of fears rob us of inner peace, and different passions drive us to do things that are not good for us or for those around us. Some of this is caused by broken families, as marriages fall apart under the strain. This only makes our personal life more painful.

Even those who are relatively happy face difficult choices at home and at work. Constant changes in our lives and in society produce confusion and a sense of instability. We seem to be floating on a wide and stormy sea in a very little boat, with no sail or rudder.

## **A FAITH FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

In this situation, a faith for the 21<sup>st</sup> century must fulfill at least four conditions:

1. Show us how to live: Ethics

First, it must show us how to live. A faith worthy of our full confidence must give guidance for handling stress; making decisions; family life; and wisdom for daily living. It must show us how

to live together in society: It must provide a philosophy for government, economics, education, health, and care for the environment. It must promote both freedom and order in the home, in society, and in the world. Such a faith must affirm each individual without promoting disharmony. In today's globalization, it must be able to bring all peoples together: Therefore, it must affirm the unity of the human race while recognizing our individual and cultural differences.

If you are interested in how Christianity has affected American society, you may see *Hope Deferred: Studies in Christianity and American Society. The Switzerland of the New Testament* shows how the faith of the Bible applies to all of life also.

## 2. Be true: Epistemology

Second, a faith for the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be true. How can we believe something that is false? That is not faith, but foolishness!

Our faith system must be true to experience. This worldview must be in accord with the findings of science; it cannot be mere superstition. At the same time, it must recognize the value of tradition and yet be open to new insights and to change

Now that this world is one small village, and we are aware of different cultures and value systems, a 21<sup>st</sup> century faith must be universal; that is, it must be true for all peoples. While transcending any particular culture, it must be able to explain and affirm the good in each one. For example, we need some view of life that acknowledges and retains what is good both in Chinese culture and in Western culture, while enabling us to see and to reject what is not healthy in each of those. For example, see my book, *Confucius and Jesus*, which compares and contrasts these two great men.

A valid faith must be essentially simple at the core but sufficiently complex to relate to all aspects of life and thought. That is, the basic ideas must be few and clear, but those principles should apply to the various problems we face and the many activities in which we engage each day.

For example, a valid faith must solve the physical problem of the relationship of the one to the many; the social problem of the relationship of the individual to the group; and the family problem of the relationship of husband and wife.

If our faith is going to be convincing, it must be logical. That is, it must be internally consistent and coherent. We cannot sacrifice our minds in order to believe something. We cannot ask people to believe that black is white, that truth is false, that good is evil. The secondary concepts should flow naturally from the primary ones, and not contradict each other.

At the same time, we must admit that we don't understand everything. The world, great civilizations like China, even individual people, are too complex. Who can deny that we are responsible for what we do? But we must also recognize that our ability to do what is right is very limited, and that we are greatly influenced by all sorts of factors outside our control. A true

faith will somehow enable us to hold on to truths that are complementary, and allow for mystery and wonder.

We are not only thinking people; we also have feelings. A really true faith must correspond to our deepest intuitions. Most people believe that there is truth, beauty, and goodness. We somehow know that love is central to life's purpose and meaning. We sense that this life has value. We assume that people are important; that actions have consequences. And most of us have a sense that there is an afterlife; this life is not the end of existence. Likewise, all over the world, and throughout history, most people believe that there is a God, and that he should be both good and powerful.

If we are going to accept a worldview, it must evoke absolute trust in us. In other words, it must seem to us to be absolute truth, and have compelling persuasiveness. Somehow, deep down inside, we must be able to believe that this faith is fundamentally true, even though we don't understand it all and even when our life is hard. Another way of putting this is to say that this faith must speak to our inner being, the depths of our soul. Indeed, it must come to us as a word from God.

The great American theologian, Carl Henry, has written about the truth of the Christian faith in his six-volume book, *God, Revelation, & Authority*. An abridgment of the first four volumes of this work of theology and philosophy gives many good reasons for accepting the Bible as God's Word to us, and answers most of the questions people have about Christianity.

### 3. Give life: Ontology

A faith for the 21<sup>st</sup> century must give life. It cannot just be a theory of life. It must create life in those who believe.

First of all, it must answer questions about the origin of life. Was Darwin right, or are we created by God? Second, it must show us how to live well now – how to stay healthy, how to earn a living, how to enjoy profound peace and joy in this life. And it must tell us how to overcome death.

A 21<sup>st</sup>-century faith must be practical. Those who believe it should be able to find strength to overcome fundamental challenges, such as guilt, fear, anger. It should enable us to deal with busyness and the loneliness that afflicts so many today. For those who are addicted to alcohol, drugs, computer games, pornography, sex, there must be power in this faith to find freedom.

Likewise, a 21<sup>st</sup>-century faith must help us find ways to reduce corruption in politics; to reduce strife between different ethnic groups; to forgive those who have inflicted deep wounds upon us.

This faith must bring out the best in each person without encouraging pride. It must speak to the whole man: Heart, hand, head. It should enlighten the mind; warm the heart; move the hand.

A faith that is worth giving your life to must produce works of beauty: art, music, poetry. It must put a song in our hearts and in our mouths.

If you are trained in philosophy, you will realize that I have just said that a faith for the 21<sup>st</sup> century must deal with all three branches of traditional Western philosophy: Ethics (how to live); epistemology (how to know anything, and how to know that we know – the question of truth); and ontology (what is the basic essence of the universe? One part of this question is, what is life?).

Those familiar with Chinese philosophy will know that ever since Confucius, most Chinese thinkers have concentrated their attention on the first of these – how to live. In the period of the “100 schools” there was some thought given to the other two branches of philosophy – people talked about whether human nature was essentially good or evil, and whether a “white horse is a horse,” for example – questions of ontology. Later, in the Song Dynasty, with the rise of neo-Confucianism, such questions were again raised, along with theories of knowledge.

Actually, we must think about epistemology and ontology! How can we know how to live, if we have no way of knowing anything? And how can we make good decisions unless we have some idea of what life is all about?

But there are two other questions which most philosophers ignore, and which Christianity discusses a great deal: First, How do we overcome our faults, and the consequences of our wrongdoing? Second, Where is this world going? What happens after I die? Of course, these two go together, for if there is a life after this one, and if only those who are good enough can enjoy happiness after death, then I must know how to be “good” enough.

That is where two other branches of thought come in: Soteriology – the doctrine of salvation; and eschatology – the doctrine of the last things. Christianity claims to tell us how to deal with our wrongdoings, and how to enjoy everlasting life.

That brings me to the last requirement of a faith for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: It must

#### 4. Lead us home

Any faith that deserves our total commitment must take us home. That is, it must tell us how to escape from bondage to evil, both now and forever.

We all want to be free, and we all want to go home. We want to have power over our bad habits and bad thoughts, and we want to go to a place where we know we are loved and where we find lasting peace.

Philosophy alone cannot change us, as many educated people have discovered. Nor can it offer us hope of love, joy, and peace both now and forever.

Most people, at some time or another, feel very tired.

We are physically tired from our work, and we desire rest.

We are emotionally tired, also. Tired of trying to please parents and spouse and children and friends and teachers. Tired of trying to appear to be successful and happy, when we are not. Tired of trying to be understood and loved. Tired of trying to overcome our faults.

We are also spiritually tired – we are weary of searching for answers, and finding none that really satisfy us. Many are tired of going from one temple to another, one god after another, one religion after another, without finding real peace.

We are not only tired, but also lonely. Is there anyone who really understands me? Is anyone really listening? Am I all alone in this vast universe?

And we are afraid. Will I graduate with good grades? Will I publish enough papers to keep my teaching position? Will I get a good enough job? Will I find a suitable mate with whom I can live happily for the rest of my life? What will happen to my children in this uncertain world? What happens if war breaks out? And what will happen to me after I die?

Any really valid faith must give me rest; it must offer me love and a family that will not fall apart; it must promise me a future without fear.

And it must take me home to God the Father.

Though most of us love our parents, we are aware that they are not perfect. Perhaps they were too busy to spend much time with us. Maybe they didn't know how to express their love for us. In some cases, parents have spoken unkind words to their children, have made them feel unworthy, and have even made them feel rejected. With the rise in the divorce rate, many people really have no place to go where they can have rest, and peace, and love.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by Me."

Clearly, he assumes that we want to go to the Father. We want a Father who will take care of us, provide for us, protect us, and love us. And we want a father who will not die and leave us alone in this cold, dark world.

Not only do we long for a father, but we want brothers and sisters, too, people who will be there when we are lonely, who will help us when we are in trouble, who will enjoy life with us and walk with us through troubled times.

Jesus promises that he can take us home – home to a Father who is also loving like our mother; home to a father who will provide all that we ever needed; home to a father who will never die. He will take us home – home to a place where we are important, and noticed, and understood, and loved. This home has no mortgage on it, so we won't be thrown out! This home can't be torn down to make way for new buildings.

This home has a family from all over the world, people of all sorts who have been given a life that will not end.



Is Christianity a faith for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? I think so. In the next three lectures, I shall try to tell you why I believe in Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life, the only one who can take us home. I shall follow the order of Jesus' words: We shall look first at Jesus as the way – and talk mostly about ethics, but also some about soteriology. Then we shall ask whether he really is the truth – and talk about epistemology. Finally, we shall try to understand what he means when he says he is the life – and here we shall deal with ontology, but also soteriology, and eschatology. Don't let these big words scare you! I shall speak very simply. I myself don't know much about philosophy, so you don't need to worry! I am just trying to show you how comprehensive the Christian faith is, and how it answers questions of all sorts, including those that philosophers ask, but also those that religious believers, and ordinary people, ask as well.

But before I go further, I want to tell you some of my own story. This will provide background for everything that is to follow.

### **NOT WANTED**

I am the youngest of five children. When my mother learned she was going to have me, she became very angry. She did not want another child. She was sick most of the time during her pregnancy and nearly died when I was being born. The doctor told my father, "I can save either the mother or the child. Which one should I save?" My father told him to try to save my mother, because she still had four children to take care of and of course he loved her. Of course, the doctor was able to save both of us.

Although I agree with his decision, I was not happy that he told me this story many times while I was growing up, usually when he was displeased with me. You can see why I started life both physically and emotionally weak.

My father was a good man, but for various reasons he did not know how to express his love to me, so I always thought that he was not very happy with me. It was not until I was 50 years old, long after my father had died, that my mother told me he was always proud of me, and told others so; he just did not tell me.

As I was growing up, my parents did not usually go to church. Actually, my father never went to church, though my mother sometimes did. We did not read the Bible or pray together in our home, except that my father did say a prayer before dinner, thanking God for the food and asking him to forgive us all our sins. When I was twelve, my mother had me attend confirmation classes in the Episcopal Church. I believed all that I was taught and loved the liturgy of the church, which was filled with quotations from the Bible; I also was moved by the music.

In my childhood, our family had everything that most people believe will give you happiness. My father was a high-ranking naval officer, so we had servants to cook and clean for us in our home (at one time we had six); a car and a driver; several gardeners; a boat that we could use any time; an airplane and a pilot; and a large house. Our guests included movie stars, members of the American Congress, leaders of foreign navies, and even Vice President Nixon.

We lived in Taiwan for one year, when I was 13 years old. My father was the Commander of the Taiwan Defense Command. He met with President Chiang Kai-shek each week, and we went to dinner parties with the General Staff of the R.O.C. military at least once a month. Our family spent almost two days with Chiang Ching-kuo, who gave us a tour of the East-West Highway, which was being built. We lived on the top of Yang Ming Shan in a house that you can see from Tien Mou; we also dined with the President and Madame Chiang in their home several times.

Despite all these things, however, our family did not have peace, and neither did I.

I went to a boys' high school for three years, a thousand miles from home. It was one of the best schools in the South. Though I liked the school, I was very unpopular. One reason was that I enjoyed the daily chapel services, which the other boys did not like. I also didn't mind keeping the many rules of the school, which they all hated. They saw me as a "good" boy, and very religious, but inside I did not know God. I read the Bible almost every day, and believed everything in the Apostles' Creed, but had no peace in my heart.

When I went to college, I continued to attend church and to read the Bible. I was one of 50 students in the honors section (out of 2,000 freshmen students). Our history teacher was an atheist, and he constantly criticized Christianity. Because I did not agree with him, all the other students thought I was a Christian. One summer, I went to work as a volunteer at a church mission to the Indians in Arizona. My roommate, who was a zealous Baptist, also thought that I was a believer.

Well, I was some sort of believer, but I had no life from God in my heart.

In my second year of college, I was so depressed that I went to the school's psychiatrist. He helped me to see that I bore some resentment against my mother, but could not tell me how to get rid of this and forgive her from my heart. Nor could he help me have love for my father. I knew I was not keeping God's commandments, but I didn't know how to have peace with God or to reform myself. My classmates considered me very religious and moral, but they didn't know how unhappy I was inside.

I was constantly bothered by headaches, which I thought might be caused by reading too much, for I did like to read, and I did well in school. Meanwhile, my older brother, who was a pastor, started telling me how he had seen God work miracles in answer to prayer. Several people with serious illnesses recovered after he prayed for them. I also noticed that he had a new kind of joy, and I wanted that very badly.

One day, in 1965, when I was 21 years old, I was visiting him, and he offered to pray for my headaches with a friend of his. As they were praising God and praying for me, I was angry with God. I didn't want to praise him. I was tired of trying to be good but not making any progress. Suddenly, however, I was filled with joy and happiness, and began to laugh. From that day to this, I have not only believed in my head that Jesus is Savior, but have known in my heart that the Bible is true.

For many years, I had been planning to become a lawyer, then a politician, and finally President of the United States! I was very interested in politics, and thought that political power is the way to change society. I had applied to three law schools and had been accepted, but God led me to become a preacher instead. I'll tell you more about my seminary career later today. While in seminary, I married Dori, whom I had met during my last year in college. We have been married for 41 years now, and have one daughter, Sarah, who is married.

Even though I have known God for 44 years now, life has not always been easy for me.

My wife and I have had the usual marital difficulties. In fact, we have spent about a dozen years in marriage counseling at various periods of our life. Our relationship is very good now, but if it had not been for God's help, we might have been divorced by now. We were not perfect parents to our daughter. We have had to apologize to her for things we did not do right. By God's help, she has forgiven us.

I have been fired from my job twice; each time was very painful to me. In high school, as I said earlier, I was very unpopular. I was also unpopular in seminary, because I believed the Bible to be true, and most of my classmates and teachers did not. I have known what it is like to be lonely and rejected.

Like most people, I have had a variety of physical ailments. I have had operations on my knees and my hands and my eye. I injured my back in Taiwan in 1978, and have to do exercises every day to keep from having pain. I have a condition on my heels that causes pain if I do not wear the right kind of shoes. My eyesight is not good. For twenty-five years, starting from the time my wife and I came to Taiwan as missionaries in 1976, my health was very bad. My whole body ached all over, I was always tired, and sometimes I had stomach aches that would keep me in bed for as long as twelve hours.

In 2001, I had a sort of breakdown. My health was bad, and my doctor told me that I was suffering from mild depression. Two reasons for my depression were worry and resentment. It took three years and the work of God to heal me. He showed me how to overcome my fears and forgive those who had hurt me. Now I am stronger and healthier than I was ten years ago.

Why am I telling you all this? Isn't this supposed to be a series of theological lectures? I am sharing my story with you because I believe that a true faith must speak to all of life, and it must enable us to enjoy peace and joy in the midst of trouble and failure. Over the past 44 years, I have discovered that when Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," he is right. My faith has been tested in many ways. I have told you about some of them, and will tell you more later. Each time, God has helped me to overcome difficulties, and my faith has come out stronger.

But this is not just my personal experience. Over the past several decades, I have traveled to a number of places in the world to visit Christians. I have been to England, Spain, Morocco, Ivory Coast, Mexico, Canada, China, and India. In each place, I have met with Christians, and I have discovered that their experience is like mine. They, too, have faced many difficulties, but they have found that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that through faith in Jesus they can know God as Father.

In all of these places, and in Charlottesville, where I have lived since 1989, I have also talked with hundreds of non-Christians. Many of them are intellectuals from Mainland China. Some have been Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists. Everywhere I go, I find that people have the same basic questions about life, and similar difficulties. When they trust in Jesus Christ to help them, they experience peace; when they do not, their lives are weighed down by sorrow, and guilt, and frustration.

The other thing I have seen in my travels and in my reading about Christianity in the West, in China, and all over the world, is that faith in Jesus Christ gives not only personal joy, but it changes relationships between people; it can guide us in our family life; it can even change entire nations and cultures.

The Christian faith transformed the Roman Empire in many ways: The awful gladiator games were stopped; unwanted babies were not left outside to die; laws were made more just; homosexual practice was no longer glorified; the old religions died out; philosophers stopped engaging in speculation, and began to think about the meaning of the Bible. Literature and the arts were transformed as well.

As Christian culture spread, the barbarian ways of northern European tribes – my ancestors! – were softened a bit. Over centuries, Christianity transformed architecture, art, music. Especially in England and America, where Protestant Christianity had the strongest influence, laws were influenced by the Bible, so that government power was limited and citizens were given more freedoms. Historians also recognized that Protestantism, with its affirmation of this world and of all honest work, led to a great economic expansion as well as scientific breakthroughs. Perhaps most importantly, biblical teaching about sex and the family uplifted the place of women, so that they were treated with dignity and respect, and it showed men how to live as well.

Of course, Western civilization also retained much of the non-Christian heritage, and true Christians were always a minority, and even they did not always live according to the teachings of the Bible, so that there was still too much war and injustice, even up to the present. We can also observe what happens when a nation rejects the Bible as its standard, as is happening in America and Europe today.

But now that the Christian faith has spread around the world, we see the ways in which it has inspired art, architecture, and music, not only in Europe but also in Latin America, Africa, India and Taiwan. Those who believe in Jesus Christ have fought for freedom and justice; they have traveled to distant lands to heal the sick and teach the poor.

## Lecture Two: The Way of Faith

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

### *Introduction*

Faith is not just a set of beliefs – which we shall talk about in the next lecture – but also a way of life. In fact all belief systems present us with a way of life. In a faith for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this way of life must be seen as conforming to a pattern which is beyond culture; an absolute standard grounded in the way of the universe and in the fundamental nature of every man. This entire subject is called “ethics” in classical Western philosophy.

1. There are different concepts of the Way: For example,

Stoicism, the most popular philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Romans, said that we must accept Fate, and live according to it, without complaining. Our mind should control the body and emotions, and it should guide us to practice the four major virtues: Prudence, temperance, courage, and wisdom. If, however, life became too difficult, and one found it impossible to live a virtuous life, then one could commit suicide.

Daoism speaks of the Way and of Virtue. We should follow what is natural, lead a quiet life without ambition or desires for material things, and avoid aggression. Daoism does not advocate taking part in society, nor does it have detailed ethical teaching. Indeed, Daoism is a basically relativistic philosophy, so it does not hold to an absolute moral code.

Buddhism believes that all suffering comes from desire, which is caused by the illusion that this life is real. We should try to extinguish our passions by following the eight-fold path: Right views, that is, good motives; right speech; right conduct; right living; right effort; right thought; and right concentration. To avoid the chains of sin, one should engage in meditation, and think especially about love, compassion, joy, and peace.

Islam imposes five obligations upon its followers: Reciting each day their basic creed that Allah is the only God and Mohammed is his prophet; reciting daily prayers five times a day; observing the fast during the month of Ramadan; giving of alms to the needy; undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslim believers must also abstain from a variety of sins, such as murder, adultery, disobedience to parents, drunkenness, gambling, shaving one’s beard, and avoiding taking part in a holy war. Islam forbids using alcohol, dancing, and the use of idols. It permits polygamy and divorce by the man, but punishes an unfaithful woman with death. It also forbids one to change his religion.

Communism has been influential in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it is still the official faith of Mainland China. Though the communists are relativists, believing that there are no absolute standards of right and wrong, they do advocate living for the good of society, and giving total obedience to the government.

Secular humanism is perhaps the most common form of ethical belief in Western society and among educated people all over the world, including Asia. Secular humanists do not believe that there is any God or absolute standards of right and wrong. Instead, they think that we should live according to the current values of society. The main one of these now is tolerance. That is, we must never say that anyone else's faith is wrong, and we must not judge their actions. Care for the environment is also very important, as are the progress of science and of democracy.

Hedonism follows from secular humanism and is the actual code by which most people seem to live. Hedonists believe in self-fulfillment, self-actualization, and self-gratification. The self – that is, my self – is at the center of their thoughts and actions. Whatever seems to make me feel good at the moment must be done, even if others disapprove or if it will hurt other people. A belief in hedonism leads to the use of drugs, addiction to entertainment, fulfillment of sexual desires outside of marriage, and many divorces.

Confucianism has been the main source for Chinese ethics for more than two thousand years. Confucius believed that there was a Heaven, which was just, and which had a will that we must follow. The way of heaven is also the way of man. For Confucianism, the main virtues are humanity (*ren*); propriety (*li*); righteousness (*yi*); filial piety (*xiao*); and honesty (*chengshi*). The most important one is *ren*, which resembles love in the Christian system. Confucius believed that our first obligation is to the family, where the wife must submit to the husband, the children to their father, and younger siblings to older siblings. Within society, students must respect teachers, elders should be honored and obeyed, and political leaders have almost total authority. Diligence in school and at work is a fundamental virtue also. The current government of China is promoting Confucianism because it wants people to work hard and obey the communist party leaders.

In order to serve one's family and make a contribution to society, we should engage in personal cultivation to overcome our faults and improve our moral character. Within the Confucian ethical system, which does not focus on a transcendent God, social harmony is of supreme importance. For the sake of not offending others, one may be allowed to do some things that might otherwise be considered "wrong."

You will notice that all these ethical systems are man-centered. They are focused on either individuals or on the group (like communism and some aspects of Confucianism). They assume that we can be good people on our strength, and that we should do so. Some of them emphasize the needs of others around us, while others, especially Daoism, secular humanism, and hedonism are concerned solely with our own individual happiness. Except for Islam and some aspects of Confucianism, they all focus on our social responsibility, not our responsibility to a heavenly being.

Furthermore, only Confucianism and Islam deal extensively with social ethics. Confucianism, however, mostly focuses on the broad category of submission to authority and the rule of virtuous men. Islam imposes a very strict and detailed law upon all citizens, but this generally has led to dictatorship, suppression of all freedoms, and great restrictions upon women.

### Christianity

Jesus said, “I am the Way.” This has at least two meanings: His life provides the pattern for ours, and his teachings provide instruction for his disciples. When he was asked which commandment was the most important, he quoted the Old Testament, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. This is the first and foremost command.” (Matthew 22:37-38)

This answer by Jesus shows that Christianity teaches that our primary responsibility is to God our heavenly Father. In some ways this is a bit similar to the teaching on filial piety in Confucianism, except that here our heavenly Father is the object of our total allegiance and entire obedience. We are to seek to know him, to love him, to serve him, to imitate him, and to find our hope and happiness in him alone. Our chief goal is not to be happy on earth, in this life, but to glorify God and enjoy him forever. This is very different from other ethical systems.

Jesus continued his response to that question of what commandment was greatest when he said, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:39) Notice that he assumed that we care for ourselves; this is just a fact of life. Confucius said that we should not do to others what we don’t want them to do to us, but Jesus puts this more positively by saying, “Whatever you want others to do to you, do also to them” (Matthew 7:12).

This is further described in the Bible in many ways. For example, children should obey their parents, but parents ought to treat their children fairly and kindly; wives should respect and submit to their husbands, but husbands should love their wives as much as they love themselves. If we don’t want others to judge us, we should not judge them. If we want others to forgive us, we should forgive them. This is a very high standard!

But Jesus then fixed an even higher standard, toward the end of his life, when he told his disciples that they must love each other as Jesus himself has loved us. And how did Jesus love his followers? He died for them, giving up his life so that they could have their sins forgiven, escape the wrath of God, and enjoy eternal life with him in a new heaven and a new earth at the end of this age.

So, husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church, sacrificing their own pleasures and ambitions for the good of their wife. When we speak, it should not be just to express ourselves, but to build others up and encourage them or to help them to understand the truth better. Those who have more than enough money should not spend it on themselves, but share it with others who are in need, especially other believers in Christ.

You may read more about Christian ethics in my book, *Confucius and Jesus*, as well as in *The Switzerland of the New Testament*. You will find examples of how Chinese Christians have served society in the book by my colleague, *Salt & Light*.

Christianity also has implications for society. The U.S. Constitution, for example, is heavily influenced by Christian ideas, even though it is not a “Christian” document. Two major assumptions are that each person is created in God’s image, and must thus be treated with respect, and that we are all also fallen and sinful, so that no one person or group should have too

much power over others. The problem of the relationship of the individual to the group can be solved, at least in theory, by acknowledging the value of each person, as created in the image of God; and the importance of the group.

The problem of balancing freedom and order can also be met by allowing individuals to have enough freedom to express their inner abilities, but not so much freedom that they harm the group or overturn social order. Thus, the American government has three branches, two houses of Congress, a Bill of Rights, and division of power between the central government and state governments. For a long time, most laws in America were also based on biblical principles of justice, thought that has changed greatly in recent years.

## 2. Problem: No one can live like this! (Except Jesus)

Now, what is the problem with all ethical systems? No one can live up to any of these standards! Even if we don't kill anybody or set anyone's house on fire, we are still basically self-centered. We may seem to be respectable people, but inside, where no one can see us, we cherish awful thoughts. We are filled with ambition, pride, greed, lust, envy, resentment.

Sometimes our thoughts break out into the open. Our words do not express the truth out of a heart of love. Instead, we lie, or boast, or say things that hurt others. We steal, or do not fulfill our obligations. In today's society, marriage is breaking down, as people have sexual relations before and outside of marriage, and divorce is rampant. Even in the home, violence is widespread. In society we see the results of all these inner faults – not only business people, but journalists and politicians are corrupt, while all the rest of us suffer. In some countries, the leaders are tyrants who oppress their people.

I have not even mentioned our lack of respect for God. Instead of worshiping him with all our heart, we neglect him, forget him, ignore him, or even disobey his clear commands. We do not honor him as our heavenly father; we are filial children. One of the results of this alienation from God is that we worry about the future, especially in times of financial and social instability.

The result is that we are alienated from God and from others. We know we are guilty, but don't know how to make up for our wrongdoing. We feel alone in this universe, far from our Creator. Not only that, but we feel distant from others, too. Some say that the worst problem in society today is loneliness, and I believe it. But there is also the pain we experience because our relationships with others are not only shallow, but also broken because of lack of love. Beginning with our parents and siblings, other people have failed to treat us as we would like, and we have done the same to them. Even if we are polite to those around us, that doesn't remove the resentment and fear that keeps us from real intimacy.

We know we should be different, but we are frustrated with ourselves because we can't change. Most ethical systems say we should just try harder to be different, but it doesn't work for us.

Of course, various religions and worldviews have suggestions for resolving these problems. Buddhism says we should engage in meditation, perhaps call on bodhisattvas to pray for us. Islam tells us to give more alms to the poor and do more good works. Roman Catholicism



teaches that we should rely on the prayers of the saints, confess our sins to the priest and receive forgiveness from him, and do more good works. These, of course, are not good enough to meet God's demands or pay for our sins, so after we die we shall spend thousands of years in Purgatory.

Secular humanism teaches that we should try to improve ourselves. In bookstores in America and the West and most airports, you can find huge numbers of self-help books. If those don't work for you, you can go to a psychiatrist or counselor. The government engages in social engineering to try to change behavior. Perhaps most common is the use of various medications to keep people from feeling too unhappy.

Hedonism, of course, advocates anything that makes you feel good at the moment, like drugs, alcohol, sex, and the accumulation of material goods. Other things to which people turn for temporary pleasure include eating, music, dance, and especially *entertainment*. Private use of computer games, pornography on the Web, and video games consume vast amounts of time, while public entertainment at movies and shows earns large amounts of money for the entertainers. Perhaps at no time in history have so many people been so addicted to entertainment.

Confucianism seeks moral improvement by self-cultivation. By meditation, reading, study, and self-discipline, one tries to overcome bad habits and build good ones.

The reality is, however, that none of these ways of overcoming our inward faults really works. They don't provide personal improvement, and they don't furnish us with personal peace. That is why millions of people have to take more drugs, drink more alcohol, watch more movies, listen to more music, read more self-help books, go to more counselors, take more medications, do more things to keep themselves busy. Nothing is filling the hungry soul. Our interpersonal conflicts remain unsolved. Social problems get bigger and bigger, despite all government efforts. The governments themselves grow more and more corrupt, as they have more power and more money at their disposal. There is less and less political freedom in more and more nations now than there was twenty years ago. Tensions between ethnic groups continue to fester, and sometimes break into open violence or even war.

### 3. Jesus is the Way

When Jesus said, "I am the Way," he meant several things. 1. His teachings give us clear guidance for daily living. 2. His example provides a pattern for us to follow. 3. His death takes away our guilt, so that our sins can be forgiven and we can be reconciled to God. 4. His resurrection from the dead makes available to us power to overcome our moral weaknesses.

#### His Teachings

Jesus begins with the existence of an all-powerful God who created the entire universe. He believes in the supreme sovereignty of God, who is Great King over all individuals and all nations. He is the only God, and we must give total allegiance to him alone – not to any other so-called "gods," or to Caesar, or to important people in our lives.

Furthermore, God is not only great, but also good. He is kind to all people, sending rain on the just and the unjust. He is just, and righteous, and holy. Therefore, we should love him above all, as I have said before. That is, we should seek to know him, serve him, live with him forever.

Thus, rather than building up treasures on earth, we should seek to acquire treasure in heaven, by doing good works and giving to others. Instead of worrying about food and drink and clothing, we should seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, trusting him to give us all that we really need. He will reward us for all that we have done in the next life.

Rather than believing that any other person can make us truly happy, we should seek happiness in God's love and care for us. No lover, no spouse, no friend, no government can satisfy our soul's desire for love and respect. Only God can do that. Jesus called himself the "bread of life," and promised that those who trust in him shall not hunger. He offered living water to fill our thirsty soul and light for daily guidance.

He told us to seek to give, not to get; to forgive and even love those who have injured us; to remain faithful to our marriage vows, and to avoid sexual sins of all kinds. (Matthew 5-7)

How happy we would be if we followed these teachings! We would be content instead of unhappy. We would not wait for others to love us before we reached out to love them. Instead of harboring resentment, we would forgive others, pray for them, and do good to them. Our hearts would not be filled with envy and rage, nor would we spend all our time trying to obtain material wealth or even security. Our work would be done in the confidence that God would supply all our material needs.

Because everyone is created in the image of God, each individual has worth. That is why Christians have been pioneers in opposing all forms of exploitation, including slavery, oppressive working conditions for laborers in factories, child labor, prostitution, foot-binding of girls in China, and other social evils. The financial crisis today was caused by widespread violation of God's laws, including his commandments not to lie, to steal, to speak falsely, and to covet. This could only happen in America on such a large scale because the elite members of the population have abandoned the teachings of the Bible.

Jesus also taught us about the power of sin. "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin," he said (John 8:34). That is why we cannot change ourselves by our own strength, and why we can't force others, including our family members, to change their behavior. It also explains why government programs, and even laws, cannot cure the fundamental ills of society. Government leaders who promise to "save" the nation and build an ideal and just society show that they overestimate their own power, and underestimate the power of the selfishness that resides in the heart of every man, woman, and child.

### His Example

As we said before, the example of Jesus also shows us the way to live. He did not pursue material prosperity or even comfort. He did not seek to advance his "career" or make a name for

himself in society. He kept all the laws of the country and obeyed all the commandments of God. For example, he always spoke the truth, even when it would displease others or expose him to rejection and danger. He honored his parents and maintained completely pure relationships with women.

He came not to be served, but to serve. Jesus went around doing good. He healed the sick, fed people who had followed him into the wilderness, delivered those who were possessed by demons, and taught everyone the truth. He could have made a lot of money doing all this, but he lived like a poor man, with no place to lay his head. Of course, Christians also believe that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who gave up his glory in heaven to come down to earth and live among us. In the end, he was willing to suffer terrible pain and torture, in order that we might not have to suffer eternal pain in hell.

The root of this life of love was his total submission to God the Father. As Son of God, he was equal to the Father in glory and power and honor, but he chose to submit to the father's plan of salvation for mankind – that is why he became a man and lived among us. Throughout his life, he listened to what God the Father was saying to him, spoke to him in prayer, sought the honor of the Father and not his own glory, and obeyed all the commandments in the Old Testament Scriptures.

The final purpose of his coming was to “save his people from their sins” by dying for them upon the cross as a sin offering, so that we would not have to pay the penalty for our disobedience to God. (Matthew 1:21)

### His Death

By dying for us, Jesus became the bridge connecting us with God the Father. Because of our transgressions, we were alienated from God and subject to the wrath of God. There was a huge chasm between us and God as a result of our sins. Nothing we can do will enable us to cross that great distance – not our good works, not our belief in other gods, not our good intentions.

But, as we have seen, the death of Jesus means that we don't have to pay the penalty for not keeping God's commands. Furthermore, his righteous conduct is credited to all who believe in him, so that we are counted righteous and holy by God. In this way, he provides access for us to God the Father, to whom we can pray. We can call upon God at any time for forgiveness of sins and for strength to do what is right.

### His Resurrection

After he died, Jesus rose again from the dead and spent more than a month with his disciples. Then they saw him ascend to heaven, where he sits at the right hand of the Father, praying for us. His first prayer was to ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit upon all who had repented of their sins and put their full confidence in Christ as Savior. When the Spirit enters a person, he receives a new heart; he is born again – not in the Buddhist sense of reincarnation, but in the sense of starting life afresh. The Spirit gives power to do what is right and to overcome the selfish

impulses that move us to do wrong. He provides the power for performance. We shall talk more about this in the fourth lecture.

Of course, we still aren't good enough. That is why Christians have to rely on Jesus as priest to supply us constantly with God's mercy. In this manner, also, he is the "Way" to the Father, for if we trust in his name we can enjoy constant access to God.

As we shall see also in the final lecture, Jesus is the "Way" to our eternal home. He has promised to return again to this world. At that time, he will raise all people from the dead. Everyone will be judged according to their works, and all will be found unworthy to enter eternal life with God. But those who have trusted in Jesus as Savior will be forgiven, because Jesus died for them, and they will live with him forever in a new world of joy and peace and love.

That is when Jesus will finally take us home to be with our Father and our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Before concluding this lecture, I want to talk about three things: The difference between the way of Jesus and other religions; the universal nature of the way of Jesus; and my own experience, the way Jesus helped me to gain freedom from resentment.

### **ARE ALL RELIGIONS THE SAME?**

You frequently hear it said that "All religions are the same; they all urge people to do good." Of course, that is correct in one sense. Most belief systems do include teachings about ethics. Communism tells people to hate and struggle against people of another class, and Islam teaches that killing innocent people in a holy war is one way to go to heaven, but even these two faiths advocate good works to benefit others.

But the way of Jesus is different in several fundamental aspects: Jesus gives us an *example* of humility, obedience, and self-sacrifice that no other religious teacher does. The teachings of Jesus and his apostles and prophets are *more comprehensive* than any other ethical system: They speak to family life, sexuality, economics, and government. The Bible gives instructions about how to behave when we are alone and when we are with others, how to act in the home, and how to benefit the larger society. It does not call us to leave the world, but to enter it, with love and service.

Jesus supplies us with different *motives* as well: His own example is a powerful incentive to sacrifice oneself for the good of others, his forgiveness of us moves us to forgive others, and he promises that we shall be rewarded in heaven for good works that we do on earth. By giving his followers the Holy Spirit, Jesus also endows them the *power* to change in a way that no other religion offers. Jesus' teaching is *realistic* about our limits of changing in this life, and yet it holds out *hope* for the future life. And, of course, only Jesus deals with the *guilt* of our sins by offering a propitiation for our sins in order that we may be forgiven.

### **THE UNIVERSAL NATURE OF THE WAY OF JESUS**

In this pluralistic and post-modern age, for any one religion to claim to have universal validity is considered arrogant. We shall deal with this view in the next lecture, which is about the truth of Christianity, but here I just want to say three things:

(1) We *already have* a universal ethical standard. In general, around the world, people agree that we should honor our parents, be faithful to our spouse; we should not hate other people or injure them, or steal from them, or lie. Most people consider greed to be wrong, and citizens of all nations don't like it when political leaders take bribes. Furthermore, love is held in high esteem everywhere.

(2) Systems of ethics do differ, however, and it is legitimate to ask whether all are equally true, or whether there is one that surpasses all the others. It is interesting to me that Christian teaching about moral conduct wins respect almost everywhere, even if Christians do not live up to the standards of the Bible. Many Chinese, for example, are deeply moved by the example of Christ, though perhaps they do not believe in him as savior. I met one professor from China a few months ago who is not a believer in the resurrection of Christ, but who thinks that China needs a culture that has been influenced by Christianity.

In the face of social injustice, Jesus spoke out boldly to rebuke those who did wrong, but he humbly submitted to unjust political leaders and indeed sacrificed himself for the benefit of others. This example had a profound impact on Mahatma Gandhi in India, Martin Luther King in America, and a number of Chinese writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. African bishops of the Anglican Church opposed American and English leaders who had approved of homosexual behavior.

Although it seems very strict, the commandment not to have sex with anyone outside of marriage actually has been shown to make possible better health and happier homes. The biblical teaching about sex has impressed many, because it protects women and children, as well as keeping everyone from contracting sexually-transmitted diseases like AIDS. On the other hand, engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage not only brings the risk of disease, but also creates anxiety, resentment, depression, and even violence.

Jesus also taught that we should not divorce our spouse and marry another. (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18) For more than forty years, Americans have experimented with easy divorce, and it has torn the heart out of our society. The same is happening in Asia as well. Maybe Jesus was right after all!

(3) From what I have said above, you can see why I think that the Bible provides the most comprehensive and useful ethical teaching, as well as giving us motives for Christian living and the power to change for the better. Furthermore, it tells us that there is only one God and that we must worship him alone. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, equal with the Father, and able to give the Holy Spirit to those who trust in him. If we do not accept him as Lord of the universe, we are saying that the most important part of the Bible is wrong.

But people of all races and nations over the past two thousand years have put their trust in Christ as the only Way to the Father. As I said in my first lecture, I have been to several countries and have seen how the Bible is accepted as the Word of God, and I have seen that those who believe

in Christ become one large family with similar faith, hope, and love. The ethical teachings of the Bible apply to all people at all times. To me, this is a strong reason for thinking that Jesus is the Way for all mankind.

### **MY EXAMPLE**

In 2001, as I have already said, I had an emotional and physical breakdown and had to take several months off to recover. Actually, I had had a chronic illness for more than twenty years, and this was just the climax of it. When I went to my doctor, he said that many of my symptoms could be caused by mild depression. I began to see several Christian counselors, one of whom reminded me that resentment can be a factor in depression. She asked whether I had any grudges against anyone, and I remembered that I had had major conflicts with two people that year. But that didn't seem to explain my condition, so she asked, "Do you have any resentment against your wife?"

"I don't think so," I responded. "She and I are pretty good about communicating with each other when we are upset. We never have a 'cold war,' but always talk about our conflicts until we have resolved them, which we usually do before the day is over."

"Well, I still think that perhaps you do have some unconscious resentment against her," she replied.

"How would I know?" I asked.

"Go home and pray about it; ask God to show you what is in your heart."

So I went home and prayed, "Lord, I don't think I have any resentment against Dori, but if I did, for what sort of things might I be holding a grudge?"

Immediately, twenty-one different things came to mind! Some were minor, others were very painful to remember. I had buried these in my heart so deeply that I didn't know they were there, but they were eating away at me and sapping my energy, as well as causing me to feel low.

What could I do? Then I remembered the teaching of Jesus, "Judge not, lest you be judged... Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:1, 3)

So, one by one, I asked God to show me where I had done something like what my wife had done to offend me. Sometimes it took a while, since I thought I was not guilty of the same fault that she was, but when I prayed for God to give me insight, he answered that prayer, and I saw that I, too, was at fault.

But then I had to realize that I not only had a "speck" in my eye like hers, but a "beam" that was even more serious than hers. That took much longer! I tended to think that my offenses were less serious than hers, but after a while, I realized that I had disobeyed God by not loving my wife as

I should. This is a very serious matter, so slowly I came to focus more on my errors than on Dori's.

At the same time, I began to ask God to forgive me, to change me, to forgive Dori, and to change her. After six months, I was ready to talk with her about these things. When I did, it was not to criticize her, but to inform her of how she had hurt me without knowing it. She is a very godly woman, and her response was very humble.

I have applied this teaching of Jesus to other situations, as well, and have found that it works. For example, one day I was angry with my daughter because her room was messy. But rather than scolding her, I asked God to give me patience, and went downstairs to my office. What did I find there? My desk was really a mess! So, when I talked to her, I said, "You and I have a problem: We are both messy. I need to clean up my desk, and you need to clean up your room; let's pray for God to help us both be neater." She took that much better than she would have responded to a harsh scolding.

Now, whenever I am angry with someone, I ask God to show me the "beam" in my own eye. He always answers that prayer! It helps me to calm down quickly. The other person may still be wrong, but my attitude improves.

I think you will agree with me that this is a good way to deal with anger and to resolve conflicts between people, especially in the family, but also in larger groups. What if the American president said to the president of China, "We have some injustices and corruption in our country which I know are of concern to you. We are working on these and hope to improve. We are also concerned about the human rights situation in your country. Can we talk together about this? Perhaps we can learn from each other."

In fact, the American Civil War would not have happened if both North and South had been willing to admit their wrongs and work together on a common solution to the problem of slavery and other things which were causing conflict between them. You can read more about this in my book, *Hope Deferred*.

Jesus taught that all of us are so corrupted in our inner nature that we are actually "slaves" to sin. When he said, "I am the Way," he meant many things: His teachings provide principles for living, his example gives us a perfect pattern, his death pays the *penalty* for our sins against God, and his resurrection offers *power* to live a more loving life.

In the next lecture, we shall ask, "Is Jesus speaking the truth?"

## Lecture Three: Faith and Truth

### *Introduction*

When Jesus said, “For this reason I was born and came into the world, that I may bear witness to the truth,” the Roman governor Pontius Pilate asked, “What is truth?” Jesus said, “I am the Truth.” Pilate questioned, “What is truth?”

Many today would echo Pilate’s question, and ask whether there is any truth and whether it can be known.

Actually, these questions are not new. The relativistic and skeptical view of post-modern people today actually has a long history. The “Academic” school of Greek philosophy in Jesus’ day denied that there was any absolute truth, holding that even if there was, we could not know it.

Today, of course, post-modernism maintains that there is no absolute truth; it all depends on your social situation. Everybody just promotes views that will keep them in power. A particular form of that is Marxism, which denies that there is any absolute truth; everything depends on your social and economic class.

19th-century Romantics reacted against reason and logic when they asserted that emotions are true. What really counts is how I feel about things now. If your feelings differ from mine, well, they are true for you but not for me. You can see that sort of philosophy in movies and songs today. In other words, relativism rules.

You can understand why people think this way. After all, there are so many different religions and belief systems, all claiming that they are true. Politicians from different parties call each other liars; which one is speaking the truth? We can’t depend upon the news media, or advertisers, or even stock brokers, to tell us what is really true. Even people who we respect, like our parents and our friends, give us contradictory advice. So, it would be easy to come to the conclusion that there is nothing really true, or at least that we can’t know what is true. Many would even say that there is no absolute right and wrong.

The problem is that people can’t live this way! Everyone believes in truth. We buy food at the store believing that the label tells me what is inside the package. In science, we assume that the world is real and that we can obtain accurate knowledge about it. When we discover that someone has lied to us, we say he did “wrong.” Different countries criticize each other, assuming that there is such a thing as the difference between right and wrong – otherwise, why would so many people be unhappy with American foreign policy?

Even those who insist that all truth is relative do so “absolutely!” I remember a conversation I had with a young graduate student who had just come from China to America. As we discussed Christianity, he declared, “There is no absolute truth!”

“Is that right?” I asked him.



“Yes! That is right!”

“Are you absolutely sure that there is no absolute truth?”

“Yes, I am absolutely sure”

“But that statement, ‘There is no absolute truth,’ sounds like an ‘absolute’ claim,” I said.

He paused for a moment, then replied, “Aside from that statement, there is no other absolute truth!”

## **EPISTEMOLOGY: HOW CAN WE KNOW ANYTHING?**

We are dealing here with the whole question of what the philosophers call epistemology, that is, the question of whether there is any truth; if there is, can we know it; and if we know it, how can we know it.

In general, as Carl Henry has pointed out in the first volume of his *God, Revelation, & Authority*, there are four answers to the question of how we can know the truth. (Volume One, chapter 4: The Ways of Knowing)

### *Experience*

Some say that we know what is true by experience. That includes personal experience; experience of others like elders; history; and science. In other words, what people have seen, heard, touched, tasted, or smelled – these things are real and they are all that we know.

This way of knowing reality relies on observation and then interpretation of observations. That is the essence of the scientific method, of course, but it also applies to history and tradition.

There is great value to this method, and it works for many situations. Scientists have helped us by discovering many useful things, such as the telephone, the computer, and modern medicine. This approach is based upon the assumption that the world is real and orderly, and that we can really know it!

But this way of discovering truth has some problems and limitations. As we all know, our observations are incomplete. The famous story of blind men feeling the different parts of the elephant is a good illustration of the difficulty we have in acquiring comprehensive knowledge of the world.

Furthermore, observation requires interpretation to be useful. Each of the blind men explained what he had felt, and thought he knew what an elephant was. His observation was accurate, though incomplete, but his interpretation was wrong. That can happen in daily life, too. Perhaps your mother or friend has a frown on her face, and you think she is angry with you, when perhaps she merely has a headache. You see clearly, but don’t draw the right conclusion from what you see.

We make other sorts of mistakes, also. The first Russian cosmonaut who orbited the earth came back and said, “I didn’t see God out there, so he must not exist!” This statement reveals at least two errors: The first is the assumption that if I haven’t seen something, it doesn’t exist; and the other is that God can be seen in space. His observation was correct: he did not “see” God in space. But his interpretation may not have been.

American astronauts came to different conclusions when they looked out the window of their space vehicle. They saw how beautiful the earth is and declared their faith in God as Creator. In fact, one of America’s astronauts became a believer as a result of his journey to the moon.

### *Reason*

Another way that people seek to know the truth is through reason. This process starts from a set of assumptions, then follows the universal laws of logic, such as the law of non-contradiction, which says that a statement may not be both true and false in the same sense at the same time. The way of reason seeks coherence and consistency, and looks for cause-and-effect relationships.

Reason works in many situations and can be very useful. After all, we are reasonable creatures, the world operates according to universal principles of logic, and people all over the world use the same ways of reasoning to understand and express the way they see reality.

On the other hand, reason has its limitations. The reasoning process relies on assumptions. But assumptions are, by definition, unproved. This means that if the assumption is wrong, the reasoning may be valid, but lead to wrong conclusions. The example from the men who went into space and came back with different conclusions provides us with a good example. The Russian started with the assumption that there is no God; the American went into space thinking that there might be a God. Each one made observations, then interpreted them on the basis of assumptions he had before he left the Earth. Their reasoning was sound in each case, but the conclusions were contradictory.

The same is true with the problem of miracles in the Bible. If there is no God, then of course miracles are impossible, and all the accounts of miracles in the Scriptures are simply myths, the product of superstition. But if there is a God who made the world, then he is all-powerful, and he could do things differently from the way that the world usually runs. An all-powerful God could part the waters of the Red Sea, feed the Israelites in the wilderness, heal the sick, and even raise the dead. It all has to do with your presuppositions.

### *Intuition*

A third way of knowing is called intuition. That’s when we just “know” that something is true, even though we can’t say why. For example, beauty is universally appreciated, though some standards vary. Still, people all over the world respond to a beautiful sunset, a lovely piece of music, a fine painting, or a pretty woman. How do you use reason to prove that something is beautiful! You don’t! Science can’t tell us, either.

Likewise, everyone assumes the existence of truth, at least as an ideal, which is why we all believe that “lying” is wrong. Moral goodness is another thing that we all assume to exist, and it is recognized all over the world. Acts of kindness, generosity, service, and sacrifice are held in honor in every society. We can’t explain the experience of being in love either, but we all know what it is!

People know by intuition that actions have consequences. Most people believe that there are rewards and punishments for doing good and evil, and that there is some sort of “heaven” and “hell” awaiting us after this life. Indeed, the existence of “God” is an almost universal belief.

There are limitations to intuition, however. The main one is that intuitions may differ. What you think is beautiful I might not; I may like my music but not yours. You may consider spicy food to be delicious, whereas I might prefer food that has only light seasoning. Neither one of us can “prove” that we are right.

Intuitions may also mislead us, causing a great deal of trouble. I have known several women who have said to me, “I know he is the one I shall marry!” Only later do they find out that he has a girlfriend or even a fiancée! In personal relationships, we may say in our heart, “I feel he/she loves/hates me,” and be completely mistaken. Even worse is the case when someone commits an action that hurts another person, but says, “I feel good about what I am doing.” I have heard parents getting a divorce say that, even in the face of much evidence that divorce hurts children deeply.

Perhaps the most difficulty comes when people of different religions, or even people of the same faith, say, “I just know that I have seen/heard a ‘word’ from ‘God,’” when others think God could not have said such a thing. Intuitions cannot be shared, explained, or tested. They lack objectivity. There is no way to determine if one intuition is closer to the truth than another.

### *Revelation*

Finally, some groups claim that they have received revelation from God. This idea is not necessarily false, if we assume that there is a personal God who can communicate his will to men. Though both Buddhist and Daoist scriptures are considered to be revelations from above, the main religions that rely on divine revelation as the primary source of knowledge about the truth are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What we call the Old Testament is a collection of 39 books that either claim to be, or are considered to be, words from God to his chosen messengers. The New Testament contains an additional 27 books of various sorts that also are believed to be inspired by God and fully true.

This Bible is the only authoritative source of truth for Evangelical Protestants. As I said, the idea of revelation assumes that there is a “God” who can “speak” to his creatures. It also assumes a capacity in men and women to receive revelation, because they are created in the image of God. Furthermore, the concept of revelation is based on the belief that words can convey meaning, and that this meaning can be understood.

Muslims believe that the Old and New Testament are God's Word, but they also hold the Koran to be inerrant revelation from God to Mohammed. Since the Koran contradicts many passages in the Bible, Islam and Christianity, though both believing in only one God, are really very different religions with conflicting beliefs.

There are problems with revelation as a way of knowing, of course. For one thing, as we have seen, there are different sorts of claims to having received revelation. In addition to the Bible, Roman Catholics also add church tradition, as expressed by the Pope, as a source of divinely-revealed truth. This would not cause much trouble if the Roman Catholic tradition did not include things that are not in the Bible and even some that contradict the Bible. That is why Protestants and Catholics have such different beliefs, even though they also share much in common.

Muslims claim that Mohammed's visions are the very words of Allah, and they think that the Koran is more accurate than the Bible, even though it was written much later than the Bible and contains many historical errors. Furthermore, even Protestants differ on some minor points of the interpretation of the Bible. Who is right? How do we decide between different understandings? No wonder people are confused! Another major problem with the Bible is that many people believe that it contradicts the findings of modern science, and others think that it contains historical mistakes and statements that are mutually contradictory.

### **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THESE PROBLEMS:**

#### *General principles*

As we have seen, the Bible assumes that there is a God who can speak reliably. He is a personal being who thinks, loves, acts, and communicates with human beings in a variety of ways. Some of these include what we can see from the world around us: dreams; visions; the events of history; our own experience; and especially the words which are written in the Bible by chosen messengers of God.

Christian revelation is received by "faith," an intuition of some sort. Since it cannot be proven beyond a doubt, that which is believed is accepted on the basis of something like intuition in the mind. At the same time, Christian revelation claims to be consistent with reason. It is internally coherent, with no major contradictions, though there are some matters that are very hard to understand. Far from being without evidence, however, Christian revelation is held to be supported by "enough" evidence from experience – including history, science, and personal experience – to make it different from superstition.

### **EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY: THE BIBLE**

Now let us talk specifically about the Evangelical Protestant understanding of truth. Protestants believe that ultimate truth – that is, truth about the most important things, such as God, man, right and wrong, and life after death – is found written in the Bible.

As we noted in the principles of Christian revelation mentioned just a moment ago, the Bible claims to be God's words to his chosen servants, written down accurately, and understandable by ordinary people with sufficient study and a heart to receive. That is, even though it was written by men, God worked in them by his Holy Spirit in such a way that what they wrote were the very words of God. These writings are true when properly interpreted, and can be understood.

But the authority of the Bible is something that we accept by faith, as God himself speaks to the heart of the reader. We cannot prove conclusively that the Bible is God's Word. The Spirit of God creates this conviction within the mind and heart of the reader who sincerely wants to know the truth. Belief in the Bible as the revelation of God, therefore, is kind of "intuition," though we believe this intuition comes from God himself.

Christians also believe that the Bible is internally consistent; it does not contradict the laws of logic, but assumes them. Many times in the Bible, the writers make a case for something following the usual rules of reasoning. For example, there is an argument from the lesser to the greater. Jesus uses it when he says, "If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask Him?" (Matthew 7:11) The argument from the greater to the lesser can be seen in Paul's question, "He who spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall he not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). Since God cannot contradict himself, his revelation to mankind does not contradict itself, either. Though there are some passages in the Bible that seem to be mutually contradictory, when they are properly understood they are found to be in agreement with each other.

The Bible does not contradict human experience, either. The research of archaeologists for more than 100 years has shown that the Bible is historically reliable. When I was studying in the Classics Department, I learned, for example, that Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and also Acts, is considered to be the most reliable historian of the Greco-Roman period. Since a great deal of the Bible consists of historical accounts, this is very significant. We may note, by the way, that the Koran is not considered to be reliable history.

There are other ways in which the Bible does not contradict human experience. For example, many of its prophecies, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, were fulfilled. This is hard to believe, unless it is the Word of God. The Bible also describes the human condition accurately. It tells us that we are made in the image of God, and capable of doing good things to others. This explains why Mencius could observe that when a child is falling into a well, we will automatically try to save it. On the other hand, the Bible also teaches that we are fallen and corrupted in our hearts, so that we are also capable of doing bad things, as Sun Tze and Han Fei Tze taught. So, Christians are not surprised when politicians or business people tell lies or take bribes; they grieve over the suffering caused by war, but know that such things are predicted in the Bible as the result of human pride, greed, and malice.

The principles of the Bible "work" when they are applied to daily life, as I said in my previous lecture. For example, when people abstain from sex outside of marriage; when husbands love their wives as they love their own bodies, and lead them in a loving fashion; when wives submit to their husbands with respect and gentleness; when husbands and wives stay together rather than

getting divorced; when children obey their parents; and when parents treat their children with kindness and respect, then family life is much happier.

Despite what many people say, the Bible does not contradict modern science. It is widely believed that science has disproved the existence of God, or at least that Darwin has proved that God did not create the world. But this idea rests on several mistaken assumptions. First, how could science disprove the existence of God? Science deals only with what can be observed repeatedly by our senses, but the Bible says that God is a Spirit, who cannot be seen or measured, though you can certainly experience the effects of his power. Science simply does not deal with spiritual matters.

Likewise, Darwin's theory of evolution is a theory, not a fact or a law. Though micro-evolution has been proven – that is, we know that kinds of plants and animals can develop and change over time – there is virtually no evidence for one kind of thing to have changed into another. Evolution as a theory faces huge problems, such as, how does life come from non-life? How does order come from chaos? How does something come from nothing? How can the upward progress assumed by evolutionism deal with the proven fact that entropy and disorder are increasing? How does random selection produce highly-organized and efficient cells – not to speak of animals and plants? Where does the information for evolutionary change come from? In fact, this theory contradicts almost everything we observe in everyday experience; to believe it requires a great deal of faith!

This is a large subject, and much has been written about it, but let me refer you to the many books which have been written that show the difficulties with Darwinian evolutionism. These include Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box*; Michael Denton, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*; Philip Johnson, *Darwin on Trial*; and *Icons of Evolution*).

Nor does the Bible contradict universally-recognized ethical principles. Chinese people believe that we should work hard and honor our elders; the Bible teaches this as well. Within Chinese society, there is a strong sense of obligation to the group—unlike the extreme individualism of the West; the Bible says that we should live not just for ourselves, but for others.

In the Bible we find an explanation for the existence of other religions and belief systems. Other religions and philosophies have some true insights; these come from what is called general revelation: since man is made in God's image, we can know some things. Man is created in the image of God, and was meant to worship God. But we have fallen away, and so we turn from God and worship things that we can see or imagine, rather than accepting his own revelation to us, so the errors in other religions are explained by the fall of man.

There are other reasons why Christians believe that the Bible is God's Word. It is beautifully written and structured. When I was doing my PhD in Classics, I had to read a number of really beautiful works by Greek and Roman writers and poets. While I admired their artistic skill, when I compared these literary productions to the Bible, I found that there is really no comparison, for the Bible is even more intricately organized and its words are even more elegant and forceful. I have read Confucius' *Analects* several times; the more I read, the more I admire Confucius, as you can see from my comparison of Confucius and Jesus. Still, however, I believe that the words

of the Bible possess even more power than do the words of Confucius. I hope you will forgive me for saying that!

### **JESUS: THE TRUTH**

Finally, we come to what Jesus said, "I am the Truth." According to the Bible (and himself) Jesus is the supreme revelation of God, and he rightly receives almost universal respect. Let us think about what he meant when he said, "I am the truth!" He spoke truth. He claimed to speak only what is true. Others agreed, and his closest friend declared that in Jesus was no deceit. How different that is from all the rest of us! Christians believe that Jesus spoke the truth about God: That he is almighty; eternal; the source of life. According to Jesus, God created the world, including human beings. He governs the world so carefully that not even a hair falls from our head without his permission. Jesus taught that God is righteous and that he requires us to be righteous as well.

Jesus spoke much about how we can know God. The first step is to repent of our sins, including the sin of loving this world more than we love God, and the sin of self-righteousness. He criticized the Pharisees of his day, and all those who think that they are morally superior to others. The other side of repentance is faith. Those who want to know God must believe in him; they must also believe in Jesus as the Son of God who was sent into the world to reveal God to us and to bear the penalty for our sins on the Cross.

Jesus not only spoke truth about our present situation and how we can know God, he also predicted the future. He told his disciples that Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Romans because the Jews had rejected their Savior, and that is what happened in 70 A.D. Jesus predicted his own death and resurrection, so that the disciples would believe in him after they saw him risen from the dead. He also said that all people will be raised up from the grave, and that all would be judged according to their works. He urged his followers to pay any price in order to gain eternal life, and promised forgiveness of sins and everlasting happiness to all who would believe in him and follow him.

In his life, Jesus fulfilled prophecies showing God's faithfulness. In other words, his life proved that God's promises in the Old Testament are true. He also upheld the validity of the rest of the Old Testament by living according to the Law of Moses and quoting many historical accounts from the Old Testament. But his miracles, death, and resurrection are the principal proofs of the truth of the Old Testament; too many prophecies were fulfilled in these events for us to say that they were merely coincidental.

But how do we know that what Jesus said about himself, his teachings, and the Old Testament is reliable? According to the Bible, the resurrection of Christ vindicates his life, teachings, and death. When his disciples saw Jesus on the third day after he had been buried, and then ate and drank and talked with him for more than a month, they knew that he was really the Son of God, the promised savior of sinners, and the one who would come to judge the world. The evidence for the resurrection is very strong. Otherwise, how do we explain the empty tomb? How do we account for the dramatic change in his followers, who had been cowardly and self-seeking?

Especially, how do we understand the total transformation of Paul, who turned from persecuting Christians to preaching that Christ was the Savior of the world?

We cannot say that the disciples stole the body, for they had all run away when he was arrested, and the Jews had placed a strong guard at the tomb. Furthermore, would they have risked death by preaching that Jesus was risen from the dead if they had known that his body was still hidden somewhere? The Jews would have had no reason to steal the body of Christ, either. The only reasonable explanation of the empty tomb is that Jesus actually came out of it, alive, with a new body given to him by the power of God.

Jesus promised his disciples that he would send to them the Holy Spirit, whom he called the Spirit of truth, to remind them of his teachings and to reveal new things to them about the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection. After he had ascended to heaven, the Spirit did come to them, giving them courage to preach to the people who had killed Jesus. As years went on, they and others to whom Jesus gave the Holy Spirit wrote down not only the story of Jesus' life, but also letters, a history of the early church, and a prophecy of the future. This is what we call the New Testament, and it also claims to be true.

So, when Jesus said, "I am the truth," he meant many things. He was referring to his words; his own life as a revelation of God's character, especially his power and his love; and the truth that he would later reveal to his followers by the Holy Spirit. We must notice here that Jesus was not only claiming to reveal the truth, but to be the truth. This shows us that ultimate truth is not only a collection of statements – though it is that – but also a person. Truth is more than ideas; it is also a relationship with the living God. At the very heart of the universe is not a number, much less a hollow core without any meaning, but a person, a God who made us and loves us and allows us to know him, now and forever.

That is why Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father but by Me." Faith in Jesus as revealed in the Bible leads to knowledge of God as Father. The most important revelation Jesus brought was the truth that we can know God not only as Maker, and Ruler, and Judge, but as Father. We can become children of God, along with countless other believers from all over the world. Jesus is making a new family to live in his house with God for all eternity. He brings us home!

As we trust in the words of the Bible and in Jesus as the truth, we are changed on the inside. Actually, this is another piece of evidence that Jesus is the truth. The words of the Bible have the power to change our minds, our hearts, and our lives. What other religion can cause proud men to humble themselves, confess their sins, rely on God, forgive their enemies, and lay down their lives in service to others?

I once had a weekly Bible study in a restaurant in Charlottesville. The workers in the restaurant included a woman who had been a doctor in China. One day she said to me, "I don't understand. When I read the Bible, I can sense a power in it. Somehow, it gives me peace, and hope. How can a book written by men do that? I have asked my friend, and she says the same thing."



I said to her, “You are right. This book is not only something composed by men. It is also the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in the minds of the writers. The Bible is not only the words of men, but it is also the Word of God.”

## **MY STORY**

Let me conclude this lecture by relaying my experience of coming to know the truth. I have already told you how I came to believe in Jesus and was changed. You know also that I had already been convinced that the Bible is true, so that my classmates believed that I was a Christian and my professor, a strong opponent of Christianity, constantly challenged me. The strange thing is that the more my professor taught us about the philosophy of the West, the more I believed that non-Christian philosophy doesn't make good sense. My faith in the truth of the Bible was stronger at the end of the course than at the beginning.

The same thing happened in seminary. Most of my professors did not believe that Jesus was the only way to God. They thought that the Bible was full of errors, and that Jesus did not rise from the dead or would not come again. I know it is strange that teachers in a Christian seminary would hold such views, but they were so-called “liberal theologians,” not evangelical Christians. They would try to point out errors in the Bible, but the more I studied, the more I saw that their assumptions were wrong. They were learned men, but they started with the idea that God could not perform miracles and that the Bible was only the words of men, so they created problems that did not exist in the Bible. I received low grades from some of my professors because they could not answer the questions I posed to them.

My classmates, too, were almost all “liberal” in their theology. They made fun of me and the four other men who believed the Bible to be the Word of God. But when I saw their lives, and listened to their reasoning, I realized that they were inconsistent in their faith and in their actions.

During the day, I had to study the views of my liberal professors, but at night I read the works of other scholars who demonstrated that the Bible is trustworthy. So, at the end of three years, my faith was stronger than when I had entered seminary. When I taught in China Evangelical Seminary, I studied several portions of the New Testament in great detail. Since there was no Greek-Chinese lexicon of the New Testament, I supervised some of my students in translating the main Greek-English lexicon. In the course of teaching and proofreading their work, I came to appreciate even more the amazing quality of the New Testament. Each word, each sentence seemed to have a meaning and a structure that could not have been the work of men only; God must have been involved.

The main challenge to the Old Testament is the theory of Evolution, which denies the teaching of the first few chapters of Genesis. I first encountered this problem when I served as a chaplain to students at a small college right after I graduated from seminary. At that time, I accepted Darwin's theory, like everyone else around me. When a student came to me and said that all of his courses assumed that evolution was a fact, and that this was undermining his faith, I began to study the matter for the first time. Though few books were available then, I learned enough to realize that the theory of evolution has some major scientific problems. I had a friend who was

working with a famous scientist, the one who discovered the DNA code; my friend was a graduate of Harvard University and was not a Christian.

I said, “Carl, it seems that Darwin’s theory has some fundamental weaknesses.”

“Yes, of course,” he replied. “All who do advanced scientific research know that.”

“So why don’t you tell people?” I asked.

He responded, “Because the only alternative is creation, and we can’t accept that!”

In other words, they hold on to evolution because they don’t want to believe in creation. Is that true science, or superstition?

Since 1988, I have been talking with scholars from Mainland China, most of whom are scientists. Most of them come to the USA believing in evolution, so I have read a number of books and articles on the subject. In the course of my study, I have learned that evolutionary theory has very little scientific support. What has surprised me is that when Chinese scholars investigate this question, they abandon their belief in evolution very quickly. They realize that it is impossible for this world, with all its order and complexity, to have come into being by chance; they are convinced that it must be the work of an intelligent, all-powerful Creator. You may find a list of some of the books on this subject in my booklet, *The Bible: God’s Word or the Words of Men?*

I have told you how my college professor could not convince me that philosophers had demonstrated that Christianity is unreasonable. The next time that I studied Western philosophy was in graduate school, when I had to take an exam in Hellenistic philosophy and in early church theology. I noticed that the major arguments against Christianity had been dealt with long ago by the early church fathers, including Augustine. When I wrote my dissertation on Augustine, I saw how he refuted skeptics and materialists and hedonists, who are the major opponents of Christianity in our time also.

While teaching at China Evangelical Seminary, I met Dr. Carl Henry, considered by some to be the greatest evangelical theologian of the twentieth century, who wrote a six-volume work called *God, Revelation, & Authority*. Dr. Henry, who died a few years ago, had two doctoral degrees and was an expert in Western philosophy, as well as in the Bible and theology. His book is hard to read, so I made an abridgment of the first four volumes of the Chinese edition. In this great work, Henry responds to all the major objections to Christianity that have been raised by philosophers, and shows that the Bible offers the most reasonable worldview. I encourage you to read this book if you want to know more.

In the past forty-five years, not only has my faith been tested by different points of view, but by the normal sufferings and challenges of life. I shall tell you more about that in the last lecture, but for now just let me say that nothing has been able to shake my conviction that the Bible is the Word of God and that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. As I have trusted in him and tried to follow his teachings, he has given me strength to overcome every hardship, including

years of bad health, and to enjoy more and more peace and joy. You may read more about this in my autobiography. I hope that you will have the same blessing also.

## **Lecture Four: Faith and Life**

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by Me.”

What did he mean by the words, “I am the life?” And what does that have to do with our own philosophical and practical concerns today? In this lecture, we shall look at the question of “life” from different angles: The origin of life; the way to enjoy physical, mental, and social well-being today; and what Jesus has to do with the greatest threat to life, namely, death itself.

### **ORIGIN OF LIFE**

The question of the origin of life haunts many people today. To take just one example, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in America (NASA) has not only put a man on the moon several times, but has sent rockets and satellites millions of miles away from earth into space for many reasons. One of the primary purposes of their many missions, which are very expensive, is to discover life on other planets. These scientists are driven by an obsession with the question of where did life on earth come from. If they can find some components of life on another planet, maybe that will help them solve this mystery. This is not simply a scientific, but also a religious quest. They want to solve a mystery that has perplexed mankind for many centuries.

Evolutionists say that life just came into being spontaneously, perhaps during the “Big Bang,” when certain gases mixed together in some way that would create life. The problem is, of course, that no one was there to see this happen; it can’t be tested in any laboratory; it faces a huge statistical obstacle—the chance of life “just happening” in that way is almost impossible; and it must also assume that it understands what, in fact, “life” really is. This theory must explain how life arose from non-life, something we have never witnessed here on earth.

Various religions have tried to answer this question, mostly with myths about the origin of the world. But none of them can really offer a solution. They all assume that what we see now came from something that also existed, and was perhaps re-fashioned by some superior being or is the result of natural causes. They cannot tell us where the first living beings actually came from.

When Jesus declared, “I am the life,” he was drawing upon the Biblical teaching that God is the source of all life. God is a living God, who has all the qualities of life. He moves, knows, acts, relates to others, and never dies. According to the Bible, God created plants, animals, and human beings out of nothing. He breathed his own life into Adam and Eve, making them a unique form of animal, one that could think, love, and relate to other people as well as to their Maker.

The Bible says that God made all things by the power of his word. In the Gospel of John, we learn that this Word was with God in the beginning, and that this Word in fact was God. All things were created through him, and in him was life. Later, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. So, Jesus is the life in the sense that all life was in him originally, and all things, including life, were made through him.

Not only material life comes from God, but immaterial life also. That is, there is something that we possess that animals and plants do not. Sometimes the Bible calls this a soul, sometimes a spirit, sometimes a mind. It is that part of us that we can't see, but which forms an essential part of who we are. Thus, to know God is to have life. As Adam and Eve discovered, to disobey God is to be cut off from spiritual fellowship with him, and thus to enter into spiritual death. When we talk about overcoming death, therefore, we shall have to face the spiritual as well as the physical aspect of death.

For more of us, the question is not where life came from, but how can we live well now? And this question has a number of facets to it. For most people throughout history, but especially in times of economic downturn, the challenge facing us is how to keep our bodies alive, clothed, and well. Material survival and prosperity occupies the thoughts of most people around the world. We spend most of our hours each day just trying to make money, to care for our households, to get food for ourselves and our families, and to find housing.

Different religions and belief systems look at this daily activity from different perspectives. For the most part, Buddhist doctrine teaches that this world is an illusion, and that we shouldn't try to make our situation better, but popular religion encourages people to take their requests to the temple and pray for a son, or a job, or a wife. The Confucian tradition encourages hard work, and the Chinese are known around the world for their ability to make money and save money. Diligence, thrift, and self-advancement seem to be the secrets to success in this life, as Chinese people have demonstrated in dozens of countries. "Connections" also help, and in some societies are essential for survival.

On a larger scale, capitalism, socialism, and communism have competed for votes and influence. Each of these three systems aims at economic prosperity, but they differ in how much the government should be involved in the day-to-day activities of ordinary people and in the running of large corporations. It is very interesting to me that China has turned more towards the free market in recent decades, while America and Europe have chosen socialism! In the past one hundred years, most people have assumed that government action is a key ingredient for national prosperity. That is why politicians promise us that they are going to give us "the good life" each time an election is held, and why we are usually so disappointed with them!

All these political-economic systems, however, assume that man is just a thinking animal. They do not take into account the spiritual nature of man. As a result, modern people have been treated like machines, and they are often exploited as such. Loneliness, isolation, confusion, and anger result from such one-sided views of man. Our inner being cannot be satisfied by material things alone. Even if we do prosper materially, that will not fill our hearts with happiness, as my own example, which I mentioned in the first lecture, demonstrates. You can have everything that money can buy, and still be sad and frustrated.

Another concern that we have is to stay healthy: the richest man in the world will not enjoy life if his body is tortured by pain and sickness. Many old diseases have been eradicated by modern medicine and public health measures, but urban life, along with the pollution that has accompanied industrialization, has placed new stresses upon us and poured poisons into our soil, water, and air, so that cancer and other diseases are almost epidemic.

There are many ways in which we try to be healthy. Millions of Chinese go to the temple to pray for good health. Some people, like me, try to eat only things that are good for you, like whole grains, vegetables, and fruits, and stay away from processed foods, white grains, sugar, and too much meat. When I was ill a few years ago, my doctor told me that I was not getting enough exercise.

Modern society emphasizes the role of medicine, but Western medicine has caused as many illnesses as it has cured. At least in the United States, more people die of the side effects of medicines and from infections gained in hospitals than they do from most diseases! The high cost of medical care keeps millions from being cared for by trained physicians.

### **BIBLICAL WAY:**

Contrary to what some people believe, the Bible is a very practical book, and it has a great deal to say about material well-being. In Genesis, we read that God created the heavens and the earth, and declared afterwards that it was “very good.” Afterwards, when Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, sickness, frustration with work, and death entered the world, but the body is nevertheless important to God.

We can find much practical advice for earning a living and succeeding in life in the Scriptures. The worldview of the Bible is balanced: it teaches that this world is good, that work is worthwhile, and that all good things come to us as gifts from God. But the frustration we meet in our work, and the lack of satisfaction we experience even when our stomachs are full are explained by the Bible as signs that we are also spiritual beings with souls and that we are made for love. We need to love others and love God, and to feel that we are loved, in order to be really happy.

The Bible is balanced in another way: it teaches us to work hard, to be frugal and live simply, but also to be generous and to rely on God. Christians believe we should give a tenth of our income to the work of the Gospel and that we can pray to our heavenly Father to give us this day our daily bread, because he knows what we need and will supply us with all that is necessary for survival. The main thing is for us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness; then everything else will be added to us.

The Bible teaches us a great deal about how to live in a healthy fashion also, as you can see from my book, *The Lord's Healing Words*. There are many guidelines for eating in the Old Testament. Although believers in Christ do not have to follow these as commands, recent science has shown us that these rules are also meant for our health. My own health has improved since I followed the food laws of the Old Testament.

In addition to proper nutrition, we also need daily exercise. The former director of the medical center at the University of Virginia wrote the forward to my book on health, but he said he had one criticism of it: I had not stressed the importance of exercise enough! I told him that the Bible doesn't talk much about exercise, since people then got all the exercise they needed in their work or just walking everywhere they went. But I promised that I would try to find a way to

emphasize the importance of exercise for good health, and I have tried to get more exercise myself.

Many studies show that people living in cities do not get enough rest and are almost always tired. The Bible tells us that we should rest one day in seven. This takes faith that God will make up for the time we have “lost” in not working, but it also gives us the needed relief from work that allows us to keep going for a long time without getting burned out. If we trust God, we can stop work early enough to spend time with our families, enjoy Christian fellowship, get enough exercise, and go to bed early to get enough sleep.

Although I believe that we should make use of the medical care that is available, we should not therefore forget to pray. God can heal now, as he did in the time of Jesus, who healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, made the lame walk, and even raised the dead. I have seen miracles of healing in response to prayer, and believe that these are still possible when it is God’s will.

But physical health is not enough. We also desire psychological well-being. In fact, modern medicine has shown a close connection between the mind and the body; each one affects the other. If you are not happy, your health will probably suffer as a result. The question is how do we deal with negative experiences and emotions, such as rejection, loneliness, anger, resentment, fear, worry, anxiety, grief over loss, and traumas? How do we have love, joy, and peace, even when things around us are not going smoothly, or we are not receiving love and respect from other people?

There are many possible approaches to this question, of course. Some people believe in positive thinking. “Just don’t worry!” they advise us. “Don’t think too much!” Try to focus on what is good and positive. This is all sound advice, and it sometimes works. Similar to that approach is the self-improvement and self-help method. You can buy hundreds of books that will tell you how to get organized, how to succeed, how to overcome fear and how to deal with annoying people. I have found many of these books helpful myself, at least temporarily.

For millions of people, however, advice is not enough. They have turned to medication for relief from their inner pain. At least in America, anti-depressant medication is very widely used, and many could not live without it. For others, illegal drugs offer an escape from pain and sorrow. These substances take you into a different world, where you can escape the worries and pressures of daily life.

Entertainment provides a similar relief to huge numbers of people. The media are ever-present, and fill our minds with fantasy, conducting us to a dream world where we can either imagine a happier life or experience the sorrows of others rather than facing our own challenges. Television, movies, computer games, DVDs, music, pornography – all promise a sort of substitute happiness but produce only temporary relief.

The same is true of sex outside of marriage. Has any culture in history been as obsessed with sex as ours is? Ever since the 1960s in America, the idea of “free love” has been promoted in every possible medium, leading people to believe that you can enjoy sex without the responsibilities of a lifelong commitment to one person. Instead, we have a rising divorce rate, sexually-transmitted

diseases, violence against unfaithful lovers, and widespread depression, especially among young people.

## **JESUS GIVES LIFE**

Jesus offers another way to inner peace, joy, and love. When he said, “I am the life,” he was referring not only to physical health, but to mental and emotional happiness also. In fact, he began his preaching ministry with the so-called Beatitudes, which show how to live a “blessed” or “happy” life. (Matthew 5:1-12)

Jesus, as our Creator, knows the real reasons for our unhappiness, and invites us into a way of life that brings lasting satisfaction and contentment. The Bible says that he is in heaven, where he prays for us; this is a great comfort to believers. If we truly repent of our offenses against God, the Spirit of Christ comes to live in us and gives us a new heart, which changes our motives. One who has been born again by faith in Christ will want to keep God’s commands. One’s mind is changed to cherish new values and priorities, such as loving God and loving those around us, rather than seeking to get as much out of this life as we can and using others.

As we pray for strength, Jesus as our High Priest enables us to resist evil and to do good. When we pray for others and for our situations, God changes people and things. I have found this to be true in my own personal experience, when I have asked God to give me wisdom to know how to love someone who is not lovable, and when I have prayed for family members and friends to change; I can’t change them, but God can.

The more we trust in Jesus as our Savior, the more God’s love fills our hearts. We become assured that our sins have been forgiven. This delivers us from the awful burden of guilt for the things we have done wrong and the things we should have done but have not. As John the Baptist said, Jesus is the “lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He died as a ransom for many; by his blood we have redemption, that is, the forgiveness of sins.

Trusting in Jesus also brings us assurance of acceptance by God the Father. Most of us have felt, more or less, that our fathers did not fully accept us. But if we confess our sins to God and trust in the sacrifice of Jesus, we have peace with God. That means that we fear no rejection. If God is for us, who can be against us? With him on our side, we can face the disapproval of other people and even rejection by family members; this is great freedom.

Since Jesus suffered all that we do, yet without sin, he offers us himself as someone who really understands us. This means that we do not fear loneliness. Even if others don’t understand us, Jesus does. Actually, there is no human being who can enter into our minds and hearts and know and feel what we do. Only Christ is able to know us fully and to feel our pain. He is the good shepherd who knows his sheep by name, so we can pour out our hearts to him in the full assurance that he is listening and that he cares.

Faith in Christ also brings comfort for loss. The risen Christ heals our wounds and our grief. How does he do this? In a variety of ways. As I said before, he fully understands us, so we can tell him all about our inner pain and know that he comprehends what we are saying. Not only



does he understand, but he also is able to feel our anguish. While on earth, he endured a great deal of sorrow from rejection, the death of Lazarus, misunderstanding on the part of family and friends, and finally the terrible torture of the last day of his life. When we communicate our grief to him, therefore, we are talking to the only person who really knows how we feel.

He gives us comfort in other ways, too. Not only does he understand, but he forgives, as we have said. He can guide us when we are perplexed about how to handle our grief. When we have lost a loved one, through separation, divorce, or death, his love can fill our hearts and provide healing. Most of all, Jesus offers us hope of eternal life, for ourselves and for other believers. Even though not all problems will be fixed in this life, and not all loss will be made up by something better, the resurrection of Jesus guarantees that someday he will wipe away all our tears and swallow up all of our sorrows in his unending joy in a new heaven and new earth.

Jesus produces inner life in a variety of other ways. For those who trust in Christ, there is a kind of “completion of ourselves.” That is, we do not need to “prove” our worth by doing anything. I don’t mean that we lie around the house and do nothing all day! No, the Bible teaches that we are “complete in Him,” meaning that we do not have to show by our performance that we have worth before God. So many people – perhaps all of us – are engaged in an unceasing effort to demonstrate our value by our achievements – good grades in school, a good job, work in society or in church – something that others can see and measure. But for those who trust in Christ, there is “justification” by faith; God accepts us as we are; he loves us; and he declares that we have ultimate value. This sets us free to respond to his love by loving others, rather than trying to earn either his love or the approval of others by doing good works or achieving success.

Every person wants to be loved. Just listen to the songs on the radio; look at the titles of novels and movies; and glance at the popular magazines. There is a huge focus on romantic love in all these media, and for good reason. We were created to love and to be loved. People get married in hopes of finding someone who will love them, and whom they can love. A boyfriend or girlfriend with whom one has a very close relationship is called a “lover”; even in mainland China, the Communists abolished the old terms for husband and wife and substituted the word “lover.”

We do not just seek romantic love, however. On Mother’s Day, we praise the sacrificial love of mothers, as we remember how our mothers stayed up late at night to care for us, and how they worked long hours to make sure that we had enough food and clothing. A faith for the 21st century must satisfy our longing for love. Otherwise, it will leave us lonely and empty, always hungering for something else.

When Jesus said, “I am the life,” he included love in the meaning of “life.” The Bible says that God is love, and that He loved the world so much that He gave His only Son, so that all who believe in Him might not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16). Paul described Christ as the one who loved him and gave himself for him. He also said, “In this the love of God for us is demonstrated, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). He said that “The love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom He gave to us” (Romans 5:5).

Jesus met a woman in Samaria who had had five husbands. Clearly, she was desperately looking for love. He promised her living waters that would spring up unto eternal life, and we know that He was speaking of His love. If we believe in Jesus, we shall know the love of God the Father and of God the Son, by the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Even if others, including our parents, our friends, or our spouse, reject us, God will never leave us nor forsake us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

Jesus' words, "I am the life" has another meaning also. As I have said, our age is marked by anxiety and depression. True "life" must include joy and gladness, peace and tranquility, even when things are not going well for us. Jesus promised His disciples that He would give them peace, even though in this world they would have troubles of all sorts. He also promised joy to them. Why is this possible?

Christ's followers have peace for several reasons. First, they know that their sins are forgiven. As a result, they have peace with God. He gives peace because He has overcome the world by rising from the dead, ascending to heaven, giving the Holy Spirit to those who trust in Him, praying for them now, and promising to return to give them eternal life in a new heaven and a new earth. In other words, we don't have to worry, because our future is safe in God's hands. Believers in Christ can tell God the Father all that is bothering them, and know that He will take care of them.

Joy comes to believers in Christ also. We can rejoice in all things and at all times, in the Lord. We don't have to complain, because we know that all things are working together for the good of those who love God. When we experience some pleasure, or see something beautiful, or receive some good gift, we have joy because we know whom to thank – God the Father, the giver of all good gifts. We can give thanks for all things, even hard things, because we know that they are meant by God for our good.

Discontent brings inner death. The more we complain, the worse life seems to be. But followers of Jesus can be contented, even if they don't have all the things that people in this world spend so much trouble to get, because they have a close relationship with their Maker; they have a Friend who will never leave them; they have family members all over the world; and they are secure in the love of God.

## **LOVING OTHERS**

When Jesus said, "I am the life," he meant also that He brings us into relationships that are characterized by love. Those who believe in Christ not only receive the love of God, but are also set free to love others. Jesus commanded us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We know also that He expects His followers to love Him, for He said, "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me." (John 14:21) Paul says that we should walk in love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself for us. (Ephesians 5:2)

That is to say, if we have known the love of Christ for us, we shall be able to love others. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. A man who has experienced the self-sacrificing love of Jesus will be empowered to show his wife that same sort of affection and care.

Believers in Christ become members of God's family; they are His beloved children. This group of disciples is called the Church, the bride of Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians are able to forgive each other, as God has forgiven us, and to lay down our lives for each other, as Christ laid down His life for us. God is creating a new family, one which transcends all racial and cultural boundaries, as I have experienced in my visits to Christians all over the world. All of this means that Jesus will bring love to those who know Him. In this way, He will banish loneliness, which some say is the curse of our time. Jesus truly is the Life!

Not only does Jesus give His people a love for each other, but He also sends them into the world to love other people as well. Just as Jesus healed the sick and taught the ignorant, so have many Christians sacrificed comfort and wealth to bring well-being to their neighbors. You may read the stories of some of these people in the Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity ([www.bdcconline.net](http://www.bdcconline.net)).

### **WHAT ABOUT WAR?**

You might ask, If Jesus gives the power to love others, then why have Christians been involved in so many wars? That is a very good question! As I have studied Western history, the answer to this question seems to be that Christians have forgotten the teachings of Jesus, the example of Jesus, and the hope that Jesus brings. They have forgotten His teachings to love our enemies and forgive those who have hurt us. They have forgotten His example of suffering at the hands of evil men, when He could have destroyed those people with a single command to His angels. They have forgotten that Jesus promises that we shall have trouble in this life, but that He will bring us into a life after death on a new earth.

The main reason Christians have fought so many wars is that they have tried to build the kingdom of God on earth; or they have tried to protect their earthly possessions; or they have made an idol of their own nation, equating it with the kingdom of God; or they have thought that they needed to fight in order to protect their religion. All of these are great errors. I hope that Chinese believers will avoid them, and put all their hopes, not in this world, but in the world to come.

### **OVERCOMING DEATH**

This brings us to the final question: How do we overcome death? As Paul said, the last and greatest enemy is death. (1 Corinthians 15:26) We all fear death, and with good reason; it is a terrible thing. Different religions and belief systems have come up with various solutions to the problem of death. The nihilist says there is no answer. Life is meaningless. Death comes. We just don't know why, or what to do about it. The Daoist says, "Death is natural." It is like putting off your clothing. Don't be afraid of death. It's just a part of life. The humanist says, "We live on in others' memory." Our bodies may die, but our spirit lives as others recall our good deeds and our character. Traditional Chinese religion says, "Our souls live on after the body dies. That is why we must worship our ancestors and provide for them. We also cherish their memory."

Many people just try to ignore death. We don't talk about it. We try to live forever, like the First Emperor, by eating the right things and getting enough rest and exercise. We pretend that death

does not exist. We just live our lives, busy with work and entertainment. What is the Biblical answer to the question of death?

According to the Bible, death entered into the world because of sin. It is God's punishment upon us for not worshiping and serving Him. But Christ died to save us from the power of sin, the penalty of sin, and finally even the presence of sin. Jesus taught that all people will rise again from the dead. At that time, our souls and bodies will be joined together again and will have an unending existence. Those who have trusted in Him and have followed in His ways will enjoy eternal life in a glorified body on a new earth. Those who have rejected Him and served created things will suffer everlasting torment in a body that cannot die.

As I have said before, death also includes soul death, which is separation from God. Jesus gives us new life, a new relationship with God, and this brings abundant life in this world and in the next. When He returns we shall enjoy communion with God, the source of all life.

Sin has also brought social death. Relationships between men and women, young and old, rich and poor, East and West – all are broken by the power of pride and selfishness and fear. In Christ, as we have seen, God has created a new society, a new family, composed of believers from all nations. When He returns, He will create a new city, the New Jerusalem, with citizens of all peoples and tongues and races and nations, all joined in loving harmony forever.

Finally, our disobedience has brought death to the world. The ecological crisis gets worse every year, especially in mainland China. Soon, the earth will not be livable: there won't be enough water, especially clean water; the soil will be poisoned; the air will be toxic. But when Jesus returns, He promises, as I have said, to make all things new. He will transform this old and decaying world into a new heaven and a new earth, with clear and living water, pure air, untainted food, and no more decay, destruction, or death of any kind.

Followers of Jesus place all their hope in His return, when He will raise us from the dead; give us glorified bodies that cannot sin, get sick, or die; wipe away all our tears; fulfill all our deepest longings; and take us home to be with the Father and with our eternal family.

Jesus said, "I am the way." He teaches us the way to live, shows us by His example how we are to love God and others, and brings us to the Father by His death on our behalf.

Jesus said, "I am the truth." He teaches us the truth, shows what it is like to live according to the truth, reveals to us how to know God as Father, and proves that God's promises are true and reliable by dying and rising again for us.

Jesus said, "I am the life." He gives us physical life by telling us how to live wisely and how to be healthy and sometimes healing us when we pray to Him. He provides us with new life in our souls and fills us with love, peace, and joy. He overcomes our loneliness by placing us into a new family. He connects us to God, the true source of all life. When He returns, He will overcome all death and usher us into an unending life of love and peace with God and our brothers and sisters.

Jesus will bring us home to God the Father, in whose house we shall have joy forever.

Other religions do offer some guidance on how to live, and contain some truth. But is there anyone else like Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life, who carries us home to our heavenly Father?