

THESE THINGS I BELIEVE

AN ESSAY BY

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The following is an essay written by Dr. Charles Malik that was published in “The Christian Activist” in 1998.

I AM A CHRISTIAN. I believe in God, the Creator from nothing of heaven and earth and of everything visible and invisible. This Creator-God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who is also identically the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. There was a man, born in Bethlehem of Judea, born of a virgin whose name was Mary, a virgin who did not know a man. This man’s name was Jesus. He lived for about thirty years in a little town in Galilee, called Nazareth, with his mother and a man called Joseph who was espoused to his mother and who remained faithful to both of them, though Mary remained ever-virgin. He was a carpenter.

Then, at about the age of thirty, this Jesus of Nazareth, began to gather around him disciples. He taught them many things about themselves, about God, and above all about Himself. He also moved about with his disciples in those idyllic Galilean villages only about a hundred miles south of where I was born, villages not much different from the villages that I know perfectly to my own region. He moved about teaching, preaching, provoking, challenging and doing many miracles. By miracles I mean such things as causing a man who was born blind to see exactly as you and I do, and raising the dead... yes, the dead!!

He said wonderful things — things pure, powerful, deeply moving, and immediately convincing. And the strange fact about many of the things he said is that they convince you only because he said them. But the totality of what he said is such that there is nothing, nothing like it in any literature. There can be approximations to it, distant rumblings of it, as in some places in the Old Testament, or in some of the teachings of Zoroaster or the Buddha, or in some of the sayings of the Muslim Sufis who came a thousand years after him, or even in some things that Socrates or Plato and the Stoics said; but when you come to what he said, you find here’s the thing, here’s the original, here’s what everybody else before him and after him was straining after and did not quite attain, so that all these others were imitations of him, intimations of him, reflections, more or less impure, of him, fallings away from him, yearnings for him. So what he said was uniquely wonderful. But what he did was also uniquely wonderful.

He chose fishermen, very simple, as his disciples, and he loved them to the end. He performed many miracles to which I have referred. But above all, he willingly and knowingly accepted death on the cross outside the wall of Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate. And nobody crucified him, nobody crucified him there except my fears and compromises and calculations and bigotries and sins — fears and compromises and sins that existed identically

and in abundance in the hearts of those who cried “Crucify Him, crucify him,” to that I am in no wise better than they, so that if I chanced to be among them I would almost certainly have joined their chorus.

It was inveterate sin, then, sin which abounds in my heart, including my lust and my forgetfulness of God, that killed Jesus of Nazareth on the cross outside the wall of Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate. And if my heart is slightly better, and to the extent that it is better, it is so because he washed away sin on the cross through his blood, and because he arose from the dead on the third day. Lo, I meant to kill him, but I did not succeed; lo, he triumphed over my evil design; lo, he liveth now and sitteth gloriously on the right hand of God. I am cleansed from my sin, then, because he did not die, although I meant him to; or rather, because he actually and completely died exactly as I meant him to, but through the power of God he actually and completely rose from the dead on the third day; and because before his absolutely humiliating defeat of my intention — although for three days I thought I had triumphed — I am shattered, I bow my head in shame, I beg his forgiveness, and—this is what overpowers me—he forgives me. I say to him after his resurrection: “Thou hast triumphed, I will not do it again; I will not hate thee again; I will not scheme against thee again; I will not love my pleasures and my self-will over thy will; I know better.” Do I really know better? Ah, that is the question? And if I do not know better, if I deny him again, he is faithful; he cannot deny himself. He keeps on forgiving me despite my sins, because that is his nature, and because he needs me no more after his triumph. And that is why, with Peter, I weep bitterly, and that is why I love him all the more.

I beg you not to be offended by the language I am using, language that is quite honorable and has been used for centuries. I am sure that you are above making fun of me when I speak of Jesus Christ sitting now at the right hand of God the Father. I am not speaking of this three-dimensional space where you speak of right and left, and above and below, and in front and behind. Ah, “sitteth at the right hand of God” is a wonderful phrase that has meaning only in the order of love and suffering and death. He who has loved much, and has suffered much, and daily faces his death, and has known Jesus Christ, understands perfectly what it’s meant by Jesus Christ rising from the dead on the third day and sitting right now at the right hand of God the Father. Whatever is the “ontological place” of God the Creator, Jesus Christ is exactly there; Jesus Christ is exactly the same mode of being as God the Creator. That is why we also use the phrase “God the Father.” Never was this wonderful phrase, “sitteth at the right hand of God,” meant except in this ontological sense, which arises wholly in the order of suffering, love, and death. I know this is how you take it, and this is how you will take everything else I shall say that might otherwise appear scandalous. In the perfect transparency of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Truth, everything is perfectly clear; and when we are together attuned in him, there can be no possibility of misunderstanding.

His words were wonderful; his acts, including his resurrection, were wonderful; but he himself is far more wonderful. He makes astounding claims about himself, claims that no German lighter criticism can possibly completely void or explain away; claims that I believe to be wholly true.

“You heard that it was said by them of old time...but I say unto you...”

“The Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins.”

“my Father, which is in heaven.”

“He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.”

“In this place is one greater than the temple.”

“For verily I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.”

“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”

“Take eat, this is my body.”

“I adjure you by the living God, that you tell us whether you be the Christ, the Son of God.”

“All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.”

“All things are delivered to me by my Father: and no man knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him.”

“Had ye believed in Moses, ye would have believed in me for he wrote of me.”

“I am the bread of life.”

“I am the light of the world.”

“I am the door.”

“I am the good shepherd.”

“I am the true vine.”

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.”

“The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.”

“I am from above, I am not of this world.”

“I proceedeth forth and came from God.”

“I and my Father are one.”

“Ye believe in God, believe also in me.”

“All things that the Father hath are mine.”

And when the woman of Samaria would again and again change the subject, he would again and again bring her back to it, until he finally told her bluntly that it was he speaking unto her who was the Christ who should come into the world.

And when Martha would change the subject by wandering off into some general cosmological expectation of the resurrection, he would bring her back to it by telling her, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

And when Thomas would change the subject by asking him to show them the Father, he would bring him back to it by telling him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

And when Philip would change the subject by asking him to show them the Father, he would bring him back to it by telling him, “Have I been so long with you, and yet not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.”

His words were wonderful, his acts were wonderful, but these claims that he made about himself are infinitely more wonderful. And what is even more wonderful about these claims is that there have been innumerable people throughout history — normal people, sane people, useful people, responsible people, in full possession of their minds— who actually believe them. Wonder of wonders — countless decent people, some of them great scientists and great philosophers, have actually believed these unbelievable claims! And these people who understood him and believed him and came to love him know that he said what he said, and did what he did, only because he was who he said he was!

Theology is exactly that discipline that tries, in all humility and in all seriousness, and without any spirit of cleverness, to make sense of them, not by explaining them away, nor by reducing them to nonsense — as so many so-called theologies do — but by believing them, and then by trying to relate them among themselves and to the other propositions of Holy Writ, as well as the deliveries of sound reason and healthy human experience. Genuine theology cannot subordinate God and how he chose to reveal himself in what it calls reason and human experience. Genuine theology must take equally seriously all three — God, reason, and experience; keeping always in mind, however, that, if God exists, he must in the nature of the case always come first. And it is a very strange discipline indeed that entertains even the slightest doubt about the existence of its object.

Religion is the realm of the authentically personal, and I have been telling you what I believe. For there is nothing more authentic and more personal than what we ultimately believe. You may not be a Christian, but you are a man therefore you certainly believe something; and your rock-bottom beliefs, even if you do not know them, or are shy or ashamed of expressing them, constitute precisely your religion. Nay, you are identically your ultimate beliefs. All these silly conversations and affected smiles that we daily and hourly carry on with one another, no doubt very innocently and well meaningly, are so many ways of “changing the subject” from our fundamental beliefs, either because we are not sure of our beliefs, or because we are ashamed of them, suspecting in our heart that they may be hollow, or because we are never quite thrown together into that peace and grace of the Spirit which enables us to be personal and authentic without being and appearing at the same time sentimental and silly. Common worship is precisely the means of inducing this peace, the grace of the Holy Spirit, whereby we can be authentically transparent with each other. This is the wonderful significance of the great liturgies, such as that of St. John Chrysostom with which I am best acquainted. It was only when “they were together in one place” that the disciples were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak in other tongues. And I am sure you agree with me that we in our hearts crave nothing more than such an experience of absolute power and illumination and certainly from above whereby we would perfectly understand each other even if we spoke “with other tongues,” or even if we did not speak at all. The “other tongues” with which I am speaking is the tongue of simple, personal conviction, which is faith in Jesus Christ. Believe me, all else is trash and dung by comparison, as Paul would say.

And so, moving on now a bit faster, I further believe — hoping and trusting that I will shock none of you, and that if I do shock you, you will forgive me — I further believe that “all things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” — a tremendous statement, certainly to be most carefully explained. I believe that this same Jesus of Nazareth who now sitteth at the right hand of God is going to come again — to come again! When? I haven’t the slightest idea. How? I do not know. But, most assuredly, he is going to come again, to judge all mankind, the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life, whom Christ sent to our hearts, so that we will not be without him, and who inspires the faithful, and comforts them, and revives them, and reminds them of Christ, and God, and all truth, and empowers them to do wonders, a mighty token of God in our midst. I believe in one Church, holy, catholic or universal or all-embracing, and, most especially, apostolic. Finally, I believe in the resurrection of the body and in the life everlasting.

I beg you, once again, not to misunderstand me. I do not believe these things in order of physical science or cosmology, that is to say, not because physical science and cosmological speculation can prove them to me. I studied under the greatest cosmologist of this century, Alfred North Whitehead; it is not in his sense that I believe these things. I cannot demonstrate them to you mathematically, or scientifically, or through sense perception, or as I might argue from the truth of some political or historical proposition. Oh, I most emphatically and assuredly believe in the actual, historical, physical, certain death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This wonderful deposit of faith, which I have received, and of which I must prove worthy, and to which I must remain faithful, belongs to the order of sufferings, anxiety, love and death. He who suffers understands what I mean. He who daily wrestles with the devil understands what I mean. He who is anxious understands what I mean. He who loves intensely understands what I mean. And he who faces death and all that this death actually and concretely means in his own life understands what I mean. Faith is grounded in the order of suffering and love, an order from which every other order, including science, philosophy, history, and politics, flows and emanates.

What now, I ask, are the reasons for my faith? After asking us to “sanctify the Lord God in our hearts” — people often forget this preamble — St. Paul adds: “Be ready always to give an answer to every man who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.” Obviously I cannot go into my reasons in great detail, but the kind of reasons I would argue from are the following:

First: The teaching of these things from my earliest life by people, both religious and lay, who loved me most purely and who had absolutely no axe to grind save to witness to the deepest they knew. Therefore, I trust them.

Second: The authority of the Church in its teachings, its traditions, its doctrines, its liturgy, for 2,000 years. Here again I believe the motive is absolutely pure; therefore I believe the Church.

Third: The authority of the Bible which I love most dearly, and which, the more I read it, increasingly means everything to me.

Fourth: The witness of the saints, and I can name twenty of them, in whose intellectual and spiritual company I crave to live more than in the company of any other crowd of men, including the greatest non-religious philosophers, whom I also love.

Fifth: The testimony of what I have called the order of suffering, loneliness, love and death, in its daily, hourly, minutely, cumulative impact upon the whole of my life.

Sixth: In a sense, this is the most important reason: the Holy Spirit in my heart, when it is there and to the extent that it is there.

To the question, what is the reason of the hope that is in me, I answer —I trust in meekness and fear and after sanctifying the Lord God in my heart —these are my reasons, that which I cannot imagine anything more solid or more dependable.

Why have I plagued you so far with my personal faith? Why have I bored you with this queer recital of the Nicene Creed, which all of you know by heart! Because religion is the realm of the authentic person; and because the current crisis, at its deepest, has to do precisely with these priceless articles of faith which were first formulated more than sixteen centuries ago and which have been faithfully confessed by the Church ever since. Today God is denied, or watered down, or changed beyond recognition. Creation is denied, or at least the world is conceived as self-creative. Jesus of Nazareth has become a “gallant young man,” as Mr. Hammarskjöld called him in his book that all of you must read. His claims about himself are either denied outright or passed by in magnificent silence. His passion is denied, the cross is denied, his resurrection is a myth, and who would dare speak today of his second coming, or of the Holy Ghost, or of the apostolicity of the Church, or, in this age of science, of the resurrection of the body, without being ridiculed.