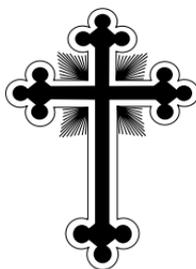




WHY I AM A
CHRISTIAN



JOHN STOTT



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Dedicated
to the memory of
Canon Miles Thomson
Rector of St. Nicholas' Church,
Sevenoaks, Kent, 1987-2000,
and a good soldier of Jesus Christ

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Preface

It was on March 6, 1927, that Bertrand Russell gave a public address in Battersea Town Hall, South London, titled “Why I Am *Not* a Christian.” It made quite a sensation at the time, partly because of the well-known eloquence of the speaker, and partly because of his sheer outspokenness. Thirty years later the speech was published in a collection of his essays. It was chapter one, and it gave its title to the whole book.¹

In his preface Bertrand Russell wrote, “I think all the great religions of the world . . . both untrue and harmful” (p. xi). Although he had some difficulty defining the kind of “Christian” he declared he was not, he was able to demolish to his satisfaction the traditional arguments for the existence of God.

In writing this short book I am not presuming to rebut Russell’s arguments point by point, for I acknowledge his brilliance as mathematician-philosopher, Nobel Prize winner for litera-

ture, and champion of logic and liberty. But I also acknowledge that there is a case to be made for Christianity that Bertrand Russell did not make or even consider.

I am grateful to Richard Bewes, Rector of All Souls Church, Langham Place, London, for inviting me to preach four sermons on this topic in 1986. Among those who later listened to the tapes was my friend, the late Miles Thomson, Rector of St. Nicholas' Church, Sevenoaks. He kept urging me to write up those four sermons into a book and to add a chapter or two. Such a book, he wrote, "would provide a fuller introduction than any of the current smaller booklets. At the same time, it would not be too heavy or too big for a genuine inquirer who wants to think through the implications of becoming a Christian."

So, having yielded to Miles Thomson's importunity, I dedicate this modest piece to his memory. *Miles* is Latin for "soldier," and that is what Miles was, a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

I thank my friends Paul Weston and Roger Simpson for reading the typescript of this book. They made a number of suggestions, most of which I have adopted. I also thank Stephanie Heald, Inter-Varsity Press's senior commissioning editor, for her attention to detail. In addition, I am extremely grateful to Frances Whitehead, my secretary for forty-seven years, for producing yet one more flawless text.

I confess that I have freely borrowed for this text from what

I have written in other contexts, especially in *The Contemporary Christian* (1992).² But I have been assured, by friends and publishers alike, that this overlap does not matter, since my personal statement or story in this book can stand on its own feet.

John Stott

For the Son of Man came to seek

and to save what was lost.

LUKE 19:10



I

The Hound of Heaven

Rapid travel and the electronic media have made us all aware (as never before) of the multiplicity of religions in the world. So how on earth can we decide between them? There is a Babel of voices competing for our attention. To which are we going to listen? We are presented with a veritable religious smorgasbord. So which dish are we going to choose? In any case, do not all religions lead to God?

It is against this pluralistic background that I want to answer the question, Why am I a Christian? Some readers will expect me to answer like this: "I'm a Christian because I happen to have been born in a largely Christian country. My parents were nominally Christian, I went to a school with a Christian foundation and I received a basically Christian education." In other words it was the circumstances of my birth, parentage and upbringing that have determined the fact that I am a Christian.

And that is, of course, perfectly true. But it is only a part of the truth. For I could have repudiated my Christian inheritance. Many people do. And there are many others who become Christians who have not had a Christian upbringing. So that is not the complete answer.

Others may expect me to reply something like this. "On February 13, 1938, when I was a youth of nearly seventeen, I made a decision for Christ. I heard a clergyman preach on Pilate's question, 'What shall I do with Jesus, who is called Christ?' Until that moment I didn't know I had to do anything with Jesus, who is called Christ. But in answer to my questions, the preacher unfolded the steps to Christ. In particular, he pointed me in the New Testament to Revelation 3:20, in which Jesus says, 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.' So that night, by my bedside, I opened the door of my personality to Christ, inviting him to come in as my Savior and Lord."

That also is true, but it constitutes only one side of the truth.

The most significant factor lies elsewhere, and it is on this that I intend to concentrate in this first chapter. Why I am a Christian is due ultimately neither to the influence of my parents and teachers, nor to my own personal decision for Christ, but to "the Hound of Heaven." That is, it is due to Jesus Christ himself, who pursued me relentlessly even when I was running

away from him in order to go my own way. And if it were not for the gracious pursuit of the Hound of Heaven I would today be on the scrapheap of wasted and discarded lives.

FRANCIS THOMPSON

“The Hound of Heaven” is a striking expression invented by Francis Thompson, whose story has been told, and his poem expounded, by R. Moffat Gautrey in his book *This Tremendous Lover*.¹

Francis Thompson spent a lonely and loveless childhood, and failed successively in his attempts to become a Roman Catholic priest, a doctor (like his father) and a soldier. He ended up lost in London until a Christian couple recognized his poetic genius and rescued him. Throughout these years he was conscious of both pursuing and being pursued, and he expressed it most eloquently in his poem “The Hound of Heaven.” Here is its beginning:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears

I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

Up vistaed hopes I sped;

And shot, precipitated,

Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,

From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
“All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”²

At first R. M. Gautrey was offended by the poem's title “The Hound of Heaven.” Is it appropriate, he asked himself, to liken God to a hound? But he came to see that there are good hounds as well as bad hounds, and that especially admirable are collies, which range the Scottish Highlands in search of lost sheep. He also saw that the theme of searching sheepdogs (or, more accurately, of searching shepherds) occurs in both the Old and the New Testament. Thus, the last verse of Psalm 23 reads:

Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Gautrey points out that the Hebrew word here translated by the mild verb “follow” should be rendered more forcefully; for instance, “goodness and mercy have hunted me, haunted me, dogged my steps all the days of my life.”³ “It is a pursuit, patient but purposeful, affectionate but relentless.”⁴

Then Jesus himself took up the metaphor of the shepherd:

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. (Luke 15:3-7)

Gautrey sees the poem as divided into five stanzas. The first he calls the "Soul's Flight," for the poet sees himself as a fugitive from the demands of discipleship. The second is the "Soul's Quest," in which the soul seeks satisfaction everywhere but cannot find it. The third stanza he titles the "Soul's Impasse," since he has discovered that life without God is meaningless. Fourth, in the "Soul's Arrest," he finally surrenders to the love of Christ. Christ speaks to him:

Alack, thou knowest not
How little worthy of any love thou art!
Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
Save Me, save only Me?⁵

In every stanza we hear that footfall of "this tremendous lover," until finally the hunt is over:

All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms . . .
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!⁶

Francis Thompson was expressing what is true of every Christian; it has certainly been true in my life. If we love Christ, it is because he loved us first (1 John 4:19). If we are Christians at all, it is not because we have decided for Christ, but because Christ has decided for us. It is because of the pursuit of “this tremendous lover.”

For evidence that the initiative is his, I invite you to take with me a fresh look at the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and then at three Christian biographies. Then I shall come back briefly to us—to me who is writing to you, and to you who are reading.

SAUL OF TARSUS

First, Saul of Tarsus. His conversion is the most celebrated in the whole history of the Christian church. Some people, however, are troubled by it. “I’ve had no sudden Damascus-road experience,” they say. But consider. Saul’s conversion was not sudden. Does that surprise you? Of course, it is true that suddenly a light flashed from heaven, and suddenly he fell to the ground and Jesus spoke to him. But that suddenness of the intervention of Jesus was not by any means the first time that Jesus had spoken to him. On the contrary, it was the climax of

a long process. How do we know that? Let me refer you to Acts 26:14: “We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’”

The Greek word *kentron* could be translated “spur,” “whip” or “goad.” Quite frequently in classical Greek, from Aeschylus onward, it was used in a metaphorical sense. Similarly, in the book of Proverbs we read:

A whip for the horse, a halter for the donkey,
and a rod for the backs of fools! (26:3)

In speaking to Saul, Jesus was likening himself either to a farmer goading a recalcitrant bullock or to a horse-trainer breaking in a rather rumbustious young colt. The implication is clear. Jesus was pursuing, prodding and pricking Saul. But Saul was resisting the pressure, and it was hard, it was painful, even futile, for him to kick against the goads.

This raises the natural question, What were the goads with which Jesus Christ was pricking Saul of Tarsus? Although we’re not told specifically, we can piece together the evidence from the book of Acts and from autobiographical flashes in Paul’s later letters.

1. Jesus was goading Saul in his mind. Saul had been educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, probably the most celebrated Jewish teacher throughout the whole of the first century

A.D. So, theologically, Saul was well versed in Judaism, and morally, he was zealous for the law. With his conscious mind in those days, he was convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was not the Messiah. To him it was inconceivable that the Jewish Messiah could be rejected by his own people and then die, apparently under the curse of God, since it was written in the law that “anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (Deuteronomy 21:23). No, no. Jesus must be an impostor. So Saul saw it as his plain duty to oppose Jesus of Nazareth and to persecute his followers. That was the conviction of his conscious mind. Subconsciously, however, his mind was full of doubts because of the rumors that were circulating about Jesus: the beauty and authority of his teaching; the meekness and gentleness of his character; his compassionate service of the poor; his mighty works of healing; and especially the persistent rumor that his death had not been the end of him, for people were claiming to have seen him, touched him and talked with him after his death. His mind was in turmoil.

2. *Jesus was goading Saul in his memory.* He had evidently been present at the trial before the Sanhedrin of a Christian leader named Stephen, whom Luke described as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5). This, then, was not rumor or hearsay. For Saul had seen with his own eyes Stephen’s face shining like the face of an angel (Acts 6:15). He had heard with his own ears Stephen’s defense, at the end of which

Stephen had claimed to see the glory of God and “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55-56). Then, when they drove Stephen out of town and stoned him to death, they laid their clothes at the feet of Saul. Luke continues his description: “While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59-60).

Saul must have said to himself, “There’s something inexplicable about these Christians. They are convinced that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and they have the courage of their convictions; they’re prepared to die for them. Moreover, they refuse to retaliate against their enemies, but they pray for them instead.” Jesus was goading Saul’s memory. He couldn’t get Stephen out of his mind.

3. Jesus was goading Saul in his conscience. Saul was an extremely righteous man, as all Pharisees were. He lived an unblemished life, and he had an unblemished reputation. As he wrote in one of his later letters, he was blameless as touching the righteousness of the law (Philippians 3:6). And yet the blameless righteousness that he claimed to possess was a purely external conformity to the requirements of the law. Outwardly he had obeyed the precepts and the prohibitions of the law. Inwardly, however, in his conscience, he knew that he was sinful. He could have said, as C. S. Lewis was to write years later, “For

the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me; a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was legion.”⁷

In Saul’s case it was the last of the Ten Commandments that convicted him. He could manage the first nine reasonably well because they had to do only with his words and deeds. But the tenth prohibited covetousness. And covetousness is neither a deed nor a word but a desire, an insatiable lust. And so, when he came across that commandment he wrote, in the very dramatic imagery of Romans 7, that it slew him.

I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.” But sin . . . produced in me every kind of covetous desire. . . . Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. (Romans 7:7-9)

4. *Jesus was goading Saul in his spirit.* I use this word in reference to that part of our human makeup which is aware of the transcendent reality of God. As a Jew, Saul had believed in God, of course, from his childhood. He’d sought to serve God from his youth with a clear conscience, and yet he knew that he was separated from the very God he believed in. He believed in him, but he didn’t know him. He was alienated from him. He said so in the

text I have just quoted: “When the commandment came . . . I died.” To use his later language, he was “dead in . . . transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1), estranged from God the life-giver.

These, I suggest, were the goads with which Jesus Christ was pricking Saul of Tarsus, and which Saul was kicking against to his own hurt. He pricked him in his mind (filling it with doubts as to whether Jesus was an impostor or true). He pricked him in his memory (reminding him of Stephen’s face, words, dignity and death). He pricked him in his conscience (convicting him of evil desires). And he pricked him in his spirit, in that vast, empty vacuum of alienation. In these ways for years Jesus had been pricking and prodding Saul, hurting him only in order to heal him. And the very fanaticism with which Saul was persecuting Christ by persecuting the church betrayed his inner uneasiness. So when Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road, it was the sudden climax of a gradual process. Saul finally surrendered to the one whom he had long been fighting and fleeing.

AUGUSTINE

I move on now to some Christian biographies, and I begin with that great early-church father, Augustine of Hippo. He was born in North Africa (in what we now call Algeria) in the middle of the fourth century. Already in his teens he was leading a dissolute, even promiscuous, life, enslaved by his passions. He wrote in his *Confessions*:

Clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence filled the air. The bubbling impulses of puberty befogged and obscured my heart so that it could not see the difference between love's serenity and lust's darkness. Confusion of the two things boiled within me. It seized hold of my youthful weakness sweeping me through the precipitous rocks of desire to submerge me in a whirlpool of vice.⁸

Even while half-drowned in sin, Augustine also plunged into study, and his studies took him first to Carthage, and then to Rome and to Milan. A great tug of war was going on in his mind between Christianity (which at this time he rejected) and Manichaeism (which he had embraced). In this turmoil of moral shame and intellectual confusion he found himself in utter misery. Yet, through his inner restlessness of mind and conscience, as also through the prayers and tears of his saintly mother, Monica, and through the kindly admonitions of Bishop Ambrose of Milan, Jesus Christ was surely pursuing him.

As with Saul of Tarsus, so with Augustine of Hippo, the climax came suddenly. He went out into the garden attached to his lodgings, accompanied by his friend Alypius. He threw himself down under a tree and let his tears flow freely as he cried out, "How long, O Lord?"

As I was saying this and weeping in the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house

chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again, “pick up and read, pick up and read . . .” I checked the flood of tears and stood up. I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find. . . . So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: “Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts” (Romans 13:13-14).

I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.⁹

Augustine attributed his experience to the sheer grace, that is the free and unmerited favor, of God. He claimed that God had quickened all five of his spiritual senses—hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch.

You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and

thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.¹⁰

But Paul belonged to the first century and Augustine to the fourth and fifth. It is time to move into our own era and see that the Hound of Heaven is still chasing people today.

MALCOLM MUGGERIDGE

Malcolm Muggeridge was a well-known figure in the second half of the twentieth century—littérateur, television personality and Christian spokesman. He described in the first part of his autobiography how, soon after graduating from Cambridge, he spent time in a remote part of South India. He wrote:

I had a notion that somehow, besides questing, I was being pursued. Footsteps padding behind me; a following shadow, a Hound of Heaven, so near that I could feel the warm breath on my neck. . . . I was also in flight. Chasing and being chased; the pursuing and the pursuit, the quest and the flight, merging at last into one single immanence or luminosity.¹¹

Muggeridge made his experience more dramatic by expressing it in a direct second-person encounter:

Yes, You were there, I know. . . . How ever far and fast I've run, still over my shoulder I'd catch a glimpse of You on

the horizon, and then run faster and farther than ever, thinking triumphantly: Now I have escaped. But no, there You were, coming after me. . . . One shivers as the divine beast of prey gets ready for the final spring. . . . There is no escape.¹²

C. S. LEWIS

But nobody has expressed this sense of the divine pursuit more eloquently than C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), whose honest account I have already referred to. Lewis was an Oxford and Cambridge scholar, literary critic, children's fiction writer and Christian apologist.

For some time before his conversion Lewis was aware that God was after him. In his autobiographical sketch *Surprised by Joy* he piles up metaphors to illustrate it. First, God was "the great Angler," playing his fish, "and I never dreamed that the hook was in my tongue."¹³ Next, he likened God to a cat chasing a mouse. "Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about 'man's search for God.' To me . . . they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat."¹⁴ Third, he likened God to a pack of hounds. "The fox had been dislodged from the Hegelian Wood and was now running in the open . . . bedraggled and weary, hounds barely a field behind. And nearly everyone now (one way or another) in the pack."¹⁵ Finally, God was the Divine Chessplayer, gradually maneuvering him into an impos-

sible position. "All over the board my pieces were in the most disadvantageous positions. Soon I could no longer cherish even the illusion that the initiative lay with me. My Adversary began to make His final moves."¹⁶ So Lewis entitled his penultimate chapter "Checkmate."¹⁷

Lewis's actual moment of surrender to Christ in Oxford he described in memorable words:

You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? . . . The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and His compulsion is our liberation.¹⁸

We must not suppose, however, that the Hound of Heaven pursues only VIPs like Saul of Tarsus, Augustine of Hippo, Malcolm Muggeridge and C. S. Lewis. Multitudes of ordinary people have testified down the Christian centuries to the same sense of Christ knocking at their door or pricking them with his goads or pursuing them.

I think I can do so myself. Indeed, because I am writing on why I am a Christian, I cannot avoid being personal and telling my story. Looking back over a long life, I have often asked myself what it was that brought me to Christ. As I have said already, it was neither my parental upbringing nor my own independent choice; it was Christ himself knocking at my door, drawing attention to his presence outside.

He did this in two major ways. The first was my sense of estrangement from God. I was no atheist. I believed in the existence of God—someone or something somewhere, the ultimate reality behind and beyond all phenomena. But I could not find him. I used to visit a dark little chapel in the school I was attending in order to read religious books and recite prayers. All to no avail. God was remote and aloof; I was unable to penetrate the fog that seemed to envelop him.

The second way in which I heard Christ knocking at my door was through my sense of defeat. With the vibrant idealism of youth I had a heroic picture of the sort of person I wanted to be—kind, unselfish and public-spirited. But I had an equally

clear picture of who I was—malicious, self-centered and proud. The two pictures did not coincide. I was high-idealed but weak-willed.

Yet through my sense of alienation and failure the Stranger at the door kept knocking, until the preacher I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter threw light on my dilemma. He spoke to me of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He explained that Christ had died to turn my estrangement into reconciliation and had been raised from the dead to turn my defeat into victory. The correspondence between my subjective need and Christ's objective offer seemed too close to be a coincidence. Christ's knocking became louder and more insistent. Did I open the door, or did he? Truly I did, but only because by his persistent knocking he had made it possible, even inevitable.

I have told you my story; I wonder about yours. Jesus assures us in his parables that, whether or not we are consciously seeking God, he is assuredly seeking us. He is like a woman who sweeps her house in search of a lost coin; like a shepherd who risks the dangers of the desert in search of only one lost sheep; and like a father who misses his wayward son and allows him to taste the bitterness of his folly, but is ready at any moment to run to meet him and welcome him home.

I am persuaded that at some point in our lives we have felt the pricking and heard the knocking of Jesus Christ, even though we may not have recognized what it was. For there are

many different ways in which he seeks us, pursues us and warns us when we are on the wrong road and heading in the wrong direction.

Sometimes it is through a sense of shame and guilt, as we remember something we have thought, said or done and are horrified by the depths of depravity to which we are capable of sinking.

Or it may be the deep, dark pit of depression, or the void of existential despair, in which nothing makes sense and everything is absurd. Or it may be the fear of death and of the possibility of judgment after death.

Alternatively and positively, we may on occasion be overwhelmed with wonder at the delicate balances of nature, or by something stunningly beautiful to the ear, the eye or the touch. Or again we may experience either the ecstasy of undeserved love or the acute pain of unrequited love, because we know instinctively that love is the greatest thing in the world. It is in such moments as these that Jesus Christ draws near to us and uses his hand to knock or to goad.

If we become aware of the relentless pursuit of Christ, and give up trying to escape from him, and surrender to the embrace of “this tremendous lover,” there will be no room for boasting in what we have done. There will only be room for profound thanksgiving for his grace and mercy, and for the firm resolve to spend time and eternity in his loving service.