

Studies in
The Book of Acts
VOLUME THREE



VICTORIOUS CHRISTIANITY

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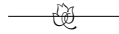
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THE IRRATIONALITY OF UNBELIEF



Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison. But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life. And when they heard that, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught. But the high priest came, and they that were with him, and called the council together, and all the senate of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came, and found them not in the prison, they returned, and told, saying, The prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without before the doors: but when we had opened, we found no man within. Now when the high priest and the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these things, they doubted of them whereunto this would grow. Then came one and told them, saying, Behold, the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people. Then went the captain with the officers, and brought them without violence: for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them, saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? And, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.

Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.

—Acts 5:17-32

This fifth chapter of Acts is an astonishing chapter. It starts with the amazing incident of the death, the judicial death, of Ananias and Sapphira. That is followed by a wonderful manifestation of the power of God through the apostles, a passage we have considered together.¹ Luke tells us:

And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people. . . . Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them. There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them which were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed every one.

—Acts 5:12, 15-16

Then comes the incident that we shall now consider. We read, “The high priest rose up, and all they that were with him . . . and were filled with indignation” (v. 17). Here is a further episode in the life of the early church, and we are looking at it for the same reason that we have been looking at the other incidents. We are concerned to discover what the Christian church is, what her message is, and what she is meant to do in this world. And it is here in Acts, and here alone, that we have the authentic account of the origin of the church.

I must emphasize that we are dealing with historical facts; without them, there would never have been a church at all. There is no other explanation for its existence, as the authorities in Jerusalem had to find out. They were confronted by a great problem. They perceived that the apostles were “unlearned and ignorant men” (Acts 4:13); they marveled at this and could not understand it. And that, of course, is the continuing marvel. The church came into being and continued in existence and was able to do the astounding things that are recorded, not only in the book of Acts but also in her sub-

sequent history down the centuries until today, because certain events took place—the events described in the Gospels and the early chapters of Acts.

Now I say again that if we are really anxious to know what Christianity is about and what the church is, it is in the Book of Acts that we can discover it. Here we have the great fundamental principles put before us in a clear and definite manner, and these are the principles that must still govern the life of the church. A church that cannot link herself up with these truths is not a Christian church. She may be an institution. She may still call herself a Christian church. But if she does not conform to the principles that are laid down here, she has no right to that name.

The great problem that is confronting so many at the present time is that there is confusion both within and, still more, outside the church about what the church is. People are in trouble, and they look to the church. But when they ask, “What is her message?” they find no clear answers. That is why it is important that we should go back and consider this early history. This, and this alone, is authentic Christianity. It is an astonishing story all the way through.

The incident we are now studying must amaze us. There is something almost incredible about it. Look at how the story opens: “Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison.”

“Then”—that is, immediately after the events that have just been recorded. What are they? Well—and this is what makes the reaction of the religious leaders so astonishing—Luke has just told us of the sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, that startling and dramatic event. And then he records an unusual display of miraculous, supernatural power. Here were people coming in from the surrounding towns and countryside bringing their sick friends and relatives, and, we are told, they were all healed. This was a visible fact, and it was this that filled the high priest and the Sadducees with indignation.

Now it is really extraordinary that the religious leaders reacted the way they did. We can all understand people being afraid as a result of those events. You suddenly see a man drop dead, and in three hours his wife drops dead in the same way. That is enough to frighten anybody. So we read, “And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things” (v. 11).

We can also understand why the people “magnified” the apostles (v. 13). It may have been that the citizens of Jerusalem were credulous, that

they were even a little bit superstitious; but I suggest that anybody hearing of the sudden judicial deaths of a man and his wife, and seeing such extraordinary miracles enacted before their very eyes, would surely have reacted with amazement. They would have felt that this was wonderful and would have been favorably disposed toward men who had been given such power. But what is surprising is that any group of people could have reacted with such anger—an anger so great that it led the Sanhedrin to arrest and imprison the apostles. And this is the phenomenon that I would like to consider with you now.

The New Testament records are very honest; they not only give us one side but give us all sides. In the case of Luke's account of Ananias and Sapphira, we have already seen an example of this honesty—Luke tells us the whole truth about those two people. This is quite unlike the methods of big business and advertising agencies. They have a policy of never admitting there is anything wrong with their products. But in the Scriptures we are told about the failures as well as the successes, the opposition as well as the support. And that is the case in the incident we are now studying. Here we are looking at an amazing picture of unbelief.

Now I call your attention to the unbelief of the religious leaders because it is just as important for us to understand the nature of unbelief as it is for us to understand belief. We have already considered the elements of belief: first, the fear of the unseen and of the power of God that, second, leads to a readiness to listen, a readiness to accept and to obey the message of the Gospel, and, third, the power of the Holy Spirit, bringing about, not some temporary, superficial reaction, but a profound change in men and women, as a result of which they become part of the body of Christ.

So we have indulged in what may be called the anatomy of belief, and now we come to the anatomy of unbelief. It is equally important for us to understand unbelief because it sometimes happens that people are brought to belief by their realization of the character of unbelief. They see how terrible it is, how horrible, how foolish and mad; and seeing that, they turn from it and believe.

So these records not only give us the positive, but also the negative pictures. It is all designed to open our eyes and understanding and bring us to a belief in this great Gospel of salvation. And, of course, we should be very grateful to God for the negative pictures. I have often put it like this: We always find it easier to grasp a point or a principle when we see it in somebody else rather than in ourselves. We are so well disposed toward ourselves, on such good terms with ourselves and always so protective of ourselves, that

we never really see the truth about ourselves. But when we see one of our faults in somebody else, we at once recognize it. A good example is the story of David and Nathan (2 Sam. 12). Just as Nathan said to David, so the Gospel says to us, "Thou art the man" (v. 7), and the truth is brought home to us. That is the value of the historical incidents and the illustrations that we find given us with such profusion in the pages of the Bible.

Furthermore, we must remember the great principle that as belief does not change through the centuries, so unbelief does not change either. Somebody may say to me, "I see what you're going to do. You're going to show us the unbelief of the chief priests and the Sadducees. But that was nineteen hundred years ago and more. We're in the twentieth century now. What has all that got to do with us?"

And the answer is that unbelief is always the same; it does not change at all. There was unbelief in the first century, and there is still unbelief today. Of all the modern fallacies, there is none quite so pathetic and so feeble as the fallacy of thinking that there is something new about unbelief. Ask the average man today why he is not a Christian, and he will almost invariably tell you that it is because he is "a twentieth-century man" [Editor's note: Martyn Lloyd-Jones went home to heaven in 1981.] In his ignorance he has an idea that in the past, people swallowed Christian teaching because they did not know any better. They were all Christians. But *he*, ah, no, he is from the twentieth century!

But here is the answer: The Gospel was rejected in the first century too. The Son of God is being rejected today in exactly the same way as He was rejected two thousand years ago, and after He died, His disciples suffered the same hatred and rejection. There is never any change. Christ remains the same, belief and faith are the same, unbelief is the same. So as we analyze the behavior of these members of the Sanhedrin in their unbelief, we find nothing but the simple truth about all who still reject the Gospel, all who turn their backs upon it, all who dislike it.

What, then, are we told here? First of all, we are told something about the nature of unbelief, and this is always the starting point. Why is it that anybody should be a nonbeliever? If you do not accept the Gospel, why is it? Have you ever thought about that? And this profound question is answered here for us. Here were men who had rejected the apostles, as they had previously rejected our Lord with the words, "Away with Him! Crucify Him! We want nothing to do with Him. Give us Barabbas."

What, then, is the nature or cause of unbelief? And our first answer, negatively, is that unbelief is not intellectual. This is a point I want to emphasize

because I know that at the present time it is the proud boast of those who scoff at religion—we see them on our television screens and read their articles—that they are rejecting Christianity for intellectual reasons. They claim they are people who have great ability, great understanding, and great powers of reasoning. And today, of course, they especially maintain that they are governed by a scientific outlook. The scientific outlook, they claim, is calm, dispassionate, and unemotional. Scientists have no preconceived notions—prejudice is the mark of religious people—and with truly detached minds they look on the facts objectively, assessing with a kind of Olympian calm the views that are placed before them.

The idea today is that men and women are not Christians because, as a result of their objective investigation, they have come to the conclusion that Christianity is not true. They say they are sorry about this. Not long ago I heard a man saying, “I wish I could believe. I wish I had faith.” And I am sure he meant it—I am not saying he was dishonest. But the trouble was that he was mistaken.

That man said, “I wish I could . . .” But he thought belief was impossible for any intelligent person. So what about this? Well, I could go on for hours on this subject, but there is no need. I can deal with it very simply. First, if you could prove to me that no one with a great intellect ever believed the Gospel, then you would be in a powerful position, but you just cannot do that. Men and women of outstanding intelligence have believed this Gospel, and that at once raises a doubt about this modern position.

Second, there have been people in this world—some recorded here in the Scriptures and many others since then—who were at first bitter opponents of the Gospel. They dismissed it and ridiculed it. They proved to themselves that it was all wrong. But later they became Christians—the same people. Why did they make this change? There is no evidence that they developed brain tumors. There is no evidence that their brains began to degenerate owing to arteriosclerosis or some other cause. Some of them changed over when they were comparatively young, and not only that, they gave abundant proof afterward that their minds were still functioning with the previous brilliance. If the same people, with the same brains, having first rejected the Gospel, later believed it, giving good reasons for the change, then surely that is evidence enough in and of itself.

Or, third, you will sometimes find two brothers, who have grown up together, with very much the same gifts, going to the same school and doing equally well, both of them at the top of their class, and both going on to university where they achieved almost identical and outstanding results, and one

is a Christian and the other is not. What accounts for the difference in belief? You cannot possibly say it is a matter of intellect, because everybody agrees that you really cannot choose between them. That, again, is enough to dispose once and forever of the argument that the modern clever person cannot be a Christian.

But then some people say, "I'll accept that, but isn't it a question of knowledge?" I find people, even bishops, writing books saying that because of the increase in scientific knowledge you cannot expect a man of the twentieth century to believe what people formerly did. We know many things today that were not known in the past, and it is these things that now make it impossible for us to believe.

All I would say in reply is that if modern knowledge is the cause of unbelief, what was the cause of the unbelief of the religious leaders in Jerusalem? Since they rejected the Gospel too, they must obviously have had some other reason for their unbelief. Unbelief is not, therefore, a question of knowledge. If it could be shown that everybody in the past believed the Gospel and that unbelief has only come in since we split the atom, then, of course, you would have a watertight case, but not otherwise. There was as much unbelief in the past as there is in the present.

But in addition to that, take all this new knowledge. It is very wonderful—I am not here to say a word against it. Anyone who says anything against modern knowledge and discoveries and inventions is just a fool. But I would point out that the increase in knowledge has nothing to do with the subject we are discussing. You split the atom. Does that tell you any more about yourself? Does the fact that the Russians have landed an instrument on the moon—which is a marvelous achievement, let us give them due credit for it—does that explain why you committed that same sin again last night that you said a week ago you would never do again? Does it help you with that? Does all this increase in knowledge tell you anything more about human beings—what they are, who they are, or what they are doing in this world? Does it tell you how to live a clean and a straight and a moral life, how to die or what lies beyond death? Jodrell Bank² cannot see through death. Sputniks cannot tell you anything about the soul or about God or about the great fundamental issues of life. Modern knowledge is irrelevant.

Those are the negatives. What, then, is the cause of unbelief? Here it is: "Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him . . . and were filled with indignation"—it has been suggested that a better translation is "anger" or "jealousy"—"and laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison." Now we are beginning to get at it, are we not? Is this

a picture of a calm, cool, scientific, unprejudiced observer? Of course not. There is no such person, and there never has been.

Some of us have had a little scientific training. I myself spent two years engaged in scientific research. And I saw as much prejudice in scientific circles as I have ever seen anywhere else. The idea that scientists are impartial, that they could never be jealous of one another and never know anything about malice or spite—put that kind of theory to scientists and just watch their expressions. No, no! This is the deception of the devil; this is where he fools us. I make so bold as to say that the cause of unbelief is not man's ability to reason but is always the result of irrationality. Unbelief is entirely a matter of feeling and prejudice, as we see here in Acts 5, and as we see equally clearly from the way in which our Lord was treated.

We are told in the twenty-fourth verse, "Now when the high priest and the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these things, they doubted of them whereunto this would grow." These leaders knew about the healing of the man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple. They had heard these "unlearned and ignorant" apostles expounding the Scriptures with eloquence and understanding. They had heard of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. They had seen extraordinary manifestations of supernatural power. They did not understand it; they could not explain it. Yet they did not adopt the truly scientific attitude, which would have been, surely, to say, "We cannot dispute the facts. Facts are facts, after all. These things are happening, and it's obvious that they are not caused by these men alone. There must be something else. What is it? Let's watch; let's see what this will lead to." Instead of adopting that attitude of humble inquiry and tolerance and fair play, instead of giving the apostles an opportunity, they dismissed these events. They were filled with angry jealousy and annoyance and indignation, and they tried to put a stop to all this preaching and teaching.

And let me prove to you that it is still the same today. Look at modern men and women. Look how tolerant they are. They are so tolerant that they are prepared not only to excuse but to legitimize moral perversion. "You see," they say, "in the past we've judged this behavior with passion. We've regarded people as criminals and have called certain actions sinful perversions. But that's all wrong. We've grown out of that now, and we really must look at these actions in an intelligent and scientific manner." So they are prepared to tolerate something that breaks the very laws of nature. I am sorry for perverts, but I am talking now about the principle, and I think the worst thing you can do for such people is praise them and make them feel that they are normal. They are not.

But though it is the boast of modern men and women that they will tolerate even perversion, even foulness, they will not tolerate the Gospel. Listen to these tolerant gentlemen speaking about the Gospel; listen to them on the radio, and notice the sneering asides, the contempt, the bitterness. There is no fair play here, no readiness to allow possibilities, only total rejection and that with harshness and scorn. Why? That is the question that confronts us, and the explanation is here before our eyes: They “were filled with indignation . . . they doubted of them whereunto this would grow” (vv. 17, 24).

What was the matter with these religious leaders? Unfortunately, we all know something about unbelief; we have all been guilty of it. These men reacted as they did because of their jealousy and pride. They were the leaders; they were the chief priests; they were the Sadducees, the leading party in the Sanhedrin.³ They were the important people, and in the past the populace had looked up to them. So they were guarding their position. They were proud of their learning; they were proud of their knowledge; they were proud of the fact that the people had always listened to them. But now they saw these uneducated men occupying the center of the stage with the crowd running after them and listening to them, and they were furious! They did not worry about miracles or the sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. All that mattered to them was their position, their great position.

I can understand these Sadducees very well. Notice that the record puts emphasis on their party: “The high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees).” Of course, the Sadducees had a real problem because they did not believe in the supernatural or in life after death, and therefore they had always taught that there was no such thing as resurrection. They did not believe in angels either. There is something almost humorous about this, is there not? Do you see their predicament? Here were these apostles, able to do marvelous things and claiming that it was because of Jesus of Nazareth—the Jesus whom the Sadducees, along with the other religious leaders, had condemned and succeeded in putting to death, and who had been buried. But the apostles said he had risen and was exercising power from heaven. Resurrection!

But still more humiliating for the Sadducees at this point was the fact that after they had the apostles thrown into the common prison, with the doors locked and the keepers on guard, on the first night the angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought the prisoners out. Angels!

Now when you have always said that resurrection is impossible and that there is no such thing as an angel, and everybody has believed you, then when things begin to happen that prove that both are true, you are obviously in

trouble. Your whole position is shaken, and people tend to laugh at you. When you come with your great pomp and ceremony in the morning and say, “Bring out the prisoners please,” and the soldiers go to the prison and come back saying that they have found the prison intact, with all the doors locked and the guards standing before them, but that there are no prisoners inside the prison, then you are indeed in trouble.

Now this is an old first-century narrative, but what a perfect picture it is of modern men and women who reject the Gospel. They have always said that there is no God. They have always said that there are no miracles and that Jesus Christ was only a man. But then something happens that they cannot explain, and some fool of an ignoramus who calls himself a Christian seems to be able to live a better life than they can and is able to help people in misery and distress in a way that they cannot. Furthermore, things happen through this ignoramus that they cannot explain. And they are in trouble. Their whole attitude, their whole position, is threatened. People are turning from them. That is the crux; that is the real cause of unbelief. What will people think of you if you become a Christian? What about your intellectual respectability?

That is why most people are not Christians; that is what is really happening within them. The whole mental framework of the modern, literate, educated, sophisticated, scientific man or woman comes crashing down to the ground—it becomes valueless if the Christian faith is accepted. And, of course, that is a terrible thing and a blow to their pride. That is why men and women do not believe the Gospel.

But then have you noticed the element of hatred and rage in the response of these religious leaders—“filled with indignation”? And you see the same rage today. Why can people not talk quietly and calmly about the Christian faith? Why can they not write about it in a rational manner? Why must they always scoff and jeer? Why this anger? Why this passion? Now I am not inventing facts. You know this as well as I do; you are as aware of it as I am. Why is it considered clever to pour scorn upon the Gospel? Why did those people deal with the Son of God as they did? Why is He still treated in the same way, together with all He stands for and all He came to do? Why are His followers still hated?

We are told that the disciples were thrown into “the common prison.” There were divisions in first-century prisons. And there was no lower prison than the common prison. This was the prison into which the felons were thrown, the men who were guilty of the vilest and foulest crimes. But nobody said, “These followers of Jesus have committed no glaring crimes. They are

not drunkards or murderers. Let's lock them up in the better part of the prison, at any rate until we have investigated further." No! The common prison. And that is the modern attitude; that is always the attitude of unbelief. It consigns everything to do with Christianity into the common prison. Thus Christ was crucified between two thieves. Is this the calm, rational, dispassionate, scientific approach to truth? Not at all. Here feeling and passion are shouting at you.

And then notice the use of authority and force, the attempt to silence the apostles, indeed the very attempt to destroy the Christian church. Again, that has always been the characteristic of unbelief. I could take you through the centuries, and we could study the history of the treatment of the saints, and we would always find the same story. Look at the way the religious leaders treated our Lord. Look at the way they treated the first Christians. Look at the treatment of Christians in the first and second centuries—the massacres, the cruelty, the branding with hot irons. Look at what happened in the Middle Ages and the treatment meted out to the Reformers in London and elsewhere, to the Puritans and the Covenanters in Scotland, and to the early Methodists. In the seventeenth century and afterward men had both their ears cut off and were branded with hot irons because of their faith.

Why do people behave with such cruelty? This is unbelief, but why this continuing passion? Is it not obvious to you? This is not intellectual detachment. This is not a calm, scientific view of truth. This is jealous anger, hatred, raging malice, and spite.

"Ah," you say, "but there's none of that today."

Is there not? Is there no persecution [in England] today? I happen to be in a position to know something about this, and, alas, it is the simple truth that there is grievous persecution today. Sometimes people have been in danger of losing their positions in high educational circles because of their belief. In all walks and departments of life people are held back because they are Christians. You can see the persecution in the articles that are written. People are ridiculed and jeered at for their faith and because they are trying to live a Christian and a moral life. You can be a pervert and you will be praised. It is said that there is something marvelous about this, this wonderful love. But if you are a Christian, then the opponents of Christianity will whisper and wink at one another, and when they get an opportunity, they will keep you down. Unfortunately, I am simply putting facts before you. And yet we are asked to believe in the cool detachment of the scientific observer and investigator. Away with such nonsense! Indignation is still the cause of unbelief.

I say again that opposition to the Christian faith is nothing but sheer irra-

tionality. It proves that it is irrational by opposing such a good thing. What were the religious leaders in Acts rejecting? We are told here that the angel appeared to the apostles and said to them, “Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.” The apostles had been imprisoned because they had been speaking “the words of this life.” So what was it that filled their enemies with fury? This is the most amazing thing of all, and if you do not agree that it is irrational, then I suggest there is something wrong with your thinking. Were these leaders rejecting some unintelligent, emotional sob story? There is no evidence of that. Were they rejecting something primitive and debased or something that was in any way whatsoever opposed to human and his best interests? Did the apostles’ teaching put fetters on the human intellect? Was it morally or spiritually harmful?

And the answer is this: “the words of this life.” What is that? Oh, here it is: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Men and women reject the message that the great God who made this world and made us all, the God who is over all and is our eternal Judge, the one against whom we have sinned and whom we have reviled and spat upon, is nevertheless a God who so loved us that He planned a way to set us free—the way of salvation. The apostle Paul puts it in these words: “The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared” (Titus 2:11). This is good news; it is the Gospel.

If the message of the Gospel were that God is a great tyrant waiting to pounce upon us and to crush us, always keeping us down and stultifying our minds and our spirits and our souls, and forcing us to live a kind of hell all our lives, I would understand people rejecting it. But it is the exact opposite. It is not God putting up an impossible legal code and saying, “Keep that and I will forgive you, and if you do not I will damn you.” No; it is God saying, “Though you have failed and sinned against Me, My love is such that I am preparing this way of salvation for you”—the grace of God. What I find so amazing is, that is what unbelievers are rejecting.

Look at those members of the Sanhedrin and their actions as recorded in Matthew 26. Look at this one on whom they are spitting. Look at the one on whom the Roman soldiers put the crown of thorns and a reed in His hand (Matt. 27). Look at them as they mock Him and jeer at Him and spit upon Him—literally—and laugh at Him in His agony on that cross. Why are they doing this to Him? What has He done? Who is He?

He is none other than the Son of God who has come into this world. He is the most amazing person the world has ever seen. We are told that he “went

about doing good” (Acts 10:38). Here is a man who mixed with tax-collectors and sinners, when the best and most respectable religious people would not be seen anywhere near such people. He sat down among them. He ate with them and spent His time with them. He allowed a poor fallen woman to wash His feet with her tears and to wipe them dry with her hair. Here is one who had a word of kindness for everybody. Here is one who had encouragement to give to the hopeless. Look at Him: He restored people who were diseased; He gave sanity to the insane; He healed the blind, the lame, the deaf; He raised the dead. Here is the person they are spitting on.

Listen to His teaching. Why, common soldiers, on hearing Him one day, had to say, “Never man spake like this man” (John 7:46). Others had to admit that they had never heard such gracious words as those that fell from His lips. If only everybody lived by His teaching today, our world would be a very different place. If only everybody practiced the Sermon on the Mount, there would be no industrial problems, there would be no social problems, there would be no moral problems, there would be no international problems. That is the one they are crucifying; that is the one they are treating with scorn and derision.

But what am I speaking about? What is He doing on that cross? He could have avoided it, He could have evaded it—He said so Himself; but He went there deliberately, because, as He put it, He had come into this world “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). He came because He is the greatest benefactor in the universe. He came because of His great heart of compassion and love. He came to set men and women free, to deliver them from the punishment they so richly deserve, to deliver them from the shackles and the bondage of the world, the flesh, and the devil. He came to make them children of God, to give them new life, and to prepare them for a glorious eternity. That is why He came; the death was a part of it, the burial was a part of it, the resurrection was a part of it, and the sending of the Holy Spirit was a part of it.

Now I ask you in all seriousness and soberness: Is such opposition rational? Is it rational to gnash your teeth against such a person? Is it rational to throw into the common prison men who tell you about Him and who show you why He came, who He is, and what He offers you?

“Go,” said the angel, and “[let them know] all the words of this life.” Life! If our Lord had offered some sort of slavery, then it would have been rational to oppose Him. I know that many people think of Christianity as slavery. They have listened to the devil, who says, “Don’t become a Christian—it will turn you into half a person. Christianity means repression.

Christianity is a teaching that tells you, ‘Don’t do this, don’t do that, don’t do the other, and have nothing to do with sex, heterosexual or homosexual.’ Both are right,” says the devil, “just carry on. Don’t listen to Christianity because if you do, you will be living a cramped, confined life. You will lose everything that is wonderful and happy and will become a little person and live a little life in a little world.” The devil says all that, and if you are not a Christian, you may be mad enough to listen!

“Go,” says the angel, “stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.” Here is *life!* Life is what you need, and the world cannot give it to you. Does drinking alcohol give you life? That is slavery; that is cutting out your highest faculties; that is crippling your mind, interfering with your judgment and your understanding of what is right. Getting drunk is not life. It is existence on an animal level.

Here is life, in the message preached by the apostles. Here is something that delivers the whole person. Here is a truth that is bigger than humanity and the world; it is the truth of God, and it stretches through death to eternity. Here is a great worldview that explains everything and all that nothing else can explain. It not only gives you intellectual life—it gives you a new moral nature, and it gives you a new joy and a new appreciation.

I am sorry for people who are not Christians. They do not know what it is to be really happy; they do not know what it is to have real life and joy and vigor and enthusiasm. That other life is a life that drags you down; it cripples you and leaves you a wreck and an empty husk. Here is life: “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). It begins here; then it grows, it expands, and it continues throughout eternity. That is what people are rejecting with such scorn and anger, with such bitterness and annoyance, as though they have been insulted.

The Gospel tells you that you can be born again, that you can have a new start, that you can have a new principle of life and a power put into you with the Spirit of God dwelling in you, a power that will set you free. And yet that is what so many people hate. Their great minds do not seem to help them very much, do they? They do not help them to keep sober or to be loyal to their marriage contracts. Their minds do not keep them from their perversions. No, no; their great minds do not help them in any respect except in some mechanical, superficial ways. But here is life that is life indeed, life that is eternal. To reject this, and to reject it with passion, is nothing but a demonstration of utter irrationality.

The final proof of irrationality is this: The members of the Sanhedrin ordered the apostles to be seized and thrown into the common prison. They

had the authority, the power, and they were going to put a stop to this preaching and healing. But—and there it is, this Christianity, this “but” that comes in, this blessed “but,” God, the power of God—“The angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, Go, stand and speak . . .” Defy them; do the thing they are telling you not to do.

The unbeliever is such a fool. He not only rejects the most glorious person the world has ever seen, he not only rejects the most glorious teaching the world has ever heard, he not only rejects life and the offer of eternal salvation, but he is mad enough to defy the living God! He thinks he has power—the power of knowledge, the power of authority, the power of science, the power of the twentieth century—and he locks the prison doors; he is going to put an end to this thing. But he cannot! Those who have been put in prison always come out.

These leaders ought to have known better; that is why we must emphasize that word “then” in verse 17: “*Then* the high priest rose up.” When? After the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. The fools! Why did they not see the power of God there, after all the miracles? They were standing against that, not against men. They were not opposing ignorant and uneducated men, but the power of God. And they became the laughingstock of the populace whom they had thought they could impress. That is the final irrationality and madness of unbelief.

If you reject this Gospel, you are not rejecting me, the preacher, you are rejecting God. The power of God. Here it is, in one incident. Lock the door of the common prison, put the guards there—but the angel of the Lord sets them free!

And that is a summary of the whole of the subsequent history of the church. In the first century clever people thought they could put an end to Christianity. Throughout the centuries they were of the same opinion, and by sword and stake, by hanging and other physical means, and in intellectual ways, as we see today, they have done their utmost to destroy the faith. But it is all futile. God has settled this once and forever.

The devil brought out his last reserves when he brought about the death and burial of the Son of God, and he thought he had triumphed. But the resurrection is the eternal answer. Though men and devils and hell still do all they can to finish Christianity and lock it up once and forever, the doors will always be opened, and the messengers, whom they think they have killed off, will be standing and addressing the world and its peoples, and the Gospel will be leading many to salvation and to life.

The final irrationality of sin is that it is not pitting itself against a man or

a human teaching but against the living God. And whatever this twentieth century may do:

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Doth his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.*

Isaac Watts

Oh, I plead with you, see your irrationality. Repent, acknowledge your folly and your error, and believe the Gospel. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31) and will be given life, and life more abundant.

NOTES

1. *Courageous Christianity*, published in the UK by The Banner of Truth Trust and in the USA by Crossway Books.
2. Jodrell Bank, south of Manchester, is the site of the world's first giant radio telescope.
3. The high court and governing authority of the Jews.
4. Michael Ramsey.
5. There was a general election in Britain at the time.
6. There was a general election in Britain in March 1966.
7. The Second World War.
8. This sermon was preached on the Sunday before the British general election on March 31, 1966.
9. This sermon was preached on Easter Sunday evening, 1966.
10. "Conversions—Psychological and Spiritual," in *Knowing the Times*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1989.
11. This book was written by Rosalind Murray about her father, Gilbert Murray.
12. "Conversions—Psychological and Spiritual."
13. On June 3, 1966, Eugene Cernan and Thomas Stafford were launched into space in Gemini 9. The purpose was to develop techniques for functioning in space.