

10

THE WAY TO THE FATHER

Many mansions

During the years 1962 to 1974 the BBC screened a TV sitcom called *Steptoe and Son*. The ‘situation’ around which the comedy was built was that of a retired rag and bone man and his son, who now runs the family business. Comedy and pathos meet regularly in this series which pushed the boundaries in the use of expletives, but was otherwise considered widely to have been a comedy triumph. In one episode, *Men of Letters*, first screened in 1972 the local vicar¹ calls to invite these two rag and bone men to write a history of ‘totting’ (the cockney word for the trade in household rubbish) for the parish centenary magazine. Albert, the older of the two, offers the vicar a drink and comments that today the local Church of England faces stiff competition from the Muslims who ‘stream out’ from the former local cinema, now a mosque, on a Friday night. The vicar says that he welcomes the presence of other believers in the local community and their contribution to an understanding of the Divine. Christianity, he implies, is not the only way to God and then he quotes from the King James Bible “**in my Father’s house are many mansions.**”

¹ A Church of England minister of religion.

THE EMPTY PROMISE OF GODISM

At this the younger son, Harold, who had on previous occasions (the vicar reminded him) expressed his views on religion 'rather forcefully' nods vigorously in agreement with an approving smile on his face.

The phrase used by the Lord Jesus about *many mansions* is one occasionally offered by church attending Godists as demonstrating that all religions belong to God and that Christianity is just one mansion. Before looking in detail at this conclusion, we will comment on the idea of 'Christian Godists'. It seems to the author on the basis of observation that there are at least two currents within this overall mindset when encountered within the setting of the Church. First are those church-attenders who have not really thought through the issues and would rather not bother; we will call them *casual Godists* for the sake of identification. Casual Godists would also include the vast majority of people 'down at the local pub' who also hold the liberal view in a liberal society that there cannot be religious exclusivity as 'this would be unfair'. Second are those church attenders who have noted the obvious claims to exclusivity revealed in the Bible, in the sayings of Jesus, in the history of Israel under the old covenant and in the reality of the church under the new covenant. They have rationalised their desire to harmonise *the religions* in the manner suggested by the Steptoe and Son vicar, by bypassing Christianity's claims to exclusivity and focusing on parts of the Bible (usually taken out of context) that they feel will buttress their view that all religions ultimately lead to the same place. For the sake of identification we will call these *determined Godists*.

We will look shortly at the overall passage from which the *many mansions* phrase is taken (John 14:2) in order to see, overall, what the Lord was revealing in this statement. The many mansions, or *many rooms*, to use the words of

THE WAY TO THE FATHER

modern translations, could be interpreted in this way: in God's house there is room for all. In practice this seems a good explanation, insofar as God's kingdom is not limited and any human being can become a subject in that Kingdom — none need be lost if they are prepared to acknowledge their own rebellion against God ('sin') and to accept the free gift of new life through Jesus by turning away from (repenting of) their former life and turning to Jesus the Saviour, asking Him into their life by faith, to become their Lord and Master — and go on believing in Him.

Some niggardly people have a cramped and narrow view of the house of God, of heaven, and appear to wish and to expect that it is a small place where they and a few kindred spirits will gather, with all the rest being left outside. In the New Testament, however, heaven is a gloriously spacious place, with 12 gates opening in every direction (Revelation 21:12–13) and multitudes pouring in from all nations, peoples and tongues: **After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."** (Revelation 7:9). In that mass of happy people the individual is not overlooked or forgotten or lost — *you* are not overlooked! Each person has his or her own distinctive, personal, exclusive place in the Father's heart, and in the Father's house. No one else can ever fill it.

This is so expansive a conclusion that we need to be cautious in using it. Without caution and reverence this statement of Jesus might well become a danger to us, seeming to sanction individual whimsies. Simply because

THE EMPTY PROMISE OF GODISM

Jesus has not expressly repudiated them, He cannot be held to have acquiesced in everything that our foolish hearts choose to desire or to claim. This author would contend that the view that all religions are essentially the same is just such a whimsy — nowhere supported by either the words of Jesus or the Bible as a whole. So, in the Father's house are indeed many rooms, but these seem to be places where we, as individual believers, will feel at home for eternity.

‘When an honoured and loved guest is coming, preparations are made which are designed to meet his tastes and likings. The books that will appeal to him are laid where he can find them; flowers which he will remember as favourites are set about the rooms. These preparations are not merely general, but are thought out for very him. And yonder Jesus Christ is so lovingly making ready for our coming; arranging a place, our place; and that with such an exact remembrance of our particular needs and likings that it cannot fit anyone else. It is your place. And it is waiting for you, yonder. We must not fail the Father; leaving him to all eternity with that room designed for us still empty. For God wants all his family to gather home, not one of them missing.’²

Commenting on the same passage, another writer said this: ‘It is an insult to Jesus to neglect heaven. Just think — He has personally prepared a place for you in His home. What a staggering thought that God the Son has been getting your home ready for you. If he has gone to such trouble to make it possible for you to live in heaven forever, how can we neglect to think of it, to anticipate it and to speak about it to one another? Remember what He has so tenderly said

² The Interpreter's Bible Volume VIII – 1952, published by Pierce and Smith. Library of Congress Card Number: 51-12276.

— **“. . . and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me so that you also may be where I am”** (John 14:3). God could have got the angels to prepare a place for us in heaven, after all, they are His servants. He could have given them a general instruction to let us in when we go there. But the deep personal love that He has for us as individuals caused Him to do it Himself! Some Christians have such a high view of God, that they can hardly conceive that God would bother about them as an individual. They reason that the apostle Paul may merit some personal attention from the Most high God, but not them. But Scripture is so plain; Jesus said that He was preparing a place for us. Why not believe it, and enjoy the thrill of it?³

So we can conclude with excitement and gratitude that the new heaven and the new earth (to give it its rightful title from Revelation chapter 21) will have many ‘rooms’ or ‘mansions’. This reflects Jesus’ love for His disciples, whom He loves *as individuals* and for whom He will prepare a special place. Other interpreters of this passage, which we provide in full below, have observed that the many mansions may also be a reference to the fact that there will be different kinds of reward for the disciple of Jesus. It seems certain for example that those who have been martyred for the name of Jesus, and those who have been persecuted⁴ for the name of Jesus, will in some way be honoured by Him through eternity for the suffering that they faithfully endured. It may be that the world’s roles may well be reversed vis a vis all those comfortable and relatively rich western

³ *Heaven and Hell*, Alex Buchanan, (Sovereign World, 1995, ISBN 1-85240-154-0, p. 16.)

⁴ At the time of writing it is estimated that one in ten of the world’s Christians face active and serious persecution, including to the point of martyrdom.

Christians and their poor third-world counterparts. Many Western Christians may have bothered little about their faith, perhaps reaching the point of loving Jesus and turning to Him in repentance, and then living quiet and law-abiding lives — but fail to go out truly in faith to serve Him. These Christians may find themselves in some way rewarded with a *smaller mansion* than awarded to those who have suffered for Him. What we can say emphatically, at this stage, is that the passage in John chapter 14 has nothing to do with the multi-faith agenda.

The Last Supper

There are four life histories (or Gospels) of Jesus in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In this chapter we focus somewhat on the last of these. At the end of the Gospel of John (21:24), we have an indication of precisely who wrote this book. John is said to be *the disciple whom Jesus loved*. Now of course He loved all the disciples, but for the young John our Lord Jesus had a special compassion. John was one of the first disciples, being among those whom Jesus called by Lake Galilee, and was probably the youngest of all of them. (Matthew 4: 21–22; Mark 1:19–20). Scholars have conjectured that he was the unnamed companion of Andrew when he first followed Jesus (John 1:35–37). That John was part of the inner circle around Jesus is indicated by the fact that he was one of the three who were allowed to be with Him at some special events,⁵ for example at the event we call the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–2; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28–29), and when Jairus' daughter was raised from death (Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51). Before Jesus' arrest at the garden of Gethsemane He took this trio to pray

⁵ The other two being Peter and James. John and James were sons of the fisherman Zebedee. Peter and his brother Andrew were also fishermen.

THE WAY TO THE FATHER

separately with Him (Matthew 26:37; Mark 14:33). It was into John's hands that Jesus entrusted his mother, at the crucifixion (John 19:26).

The Gospel according to John presents Jesus as the eternal Word of God who became a human and who 'lived among us'. As the Gospel itself says, it was written so its readers might *believe* that Jesus is the promised saviour, the Son of God, and that through their faith in Him they might *have life* (John 20:31). The part that we are about to focus on takes place in what we now call 'the last supper'. Chapters 13–17 of John record at length the close fellowship of Jesus with his disciples on the night of his arrest and the words of preparation and encouragement given to them on the eve of His crucifixion. So it is there, at that last supper, as Jesus' heart is so heavy knowing what is about to happen to Him, and probably also the hearts of the disciples who have some dim understanding that a crisis or a turning point is near, that we join them. We join them, if you like, at the table. The text is from John 14:1–13. It is the Lord Jesus Who is speaking:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, **“Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”**

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.

It was John Stott, the Anglican writer and Bible teacher, who commented that when the church goes wrong on Christ, it goes wrong on everything. Stott meant the Church’s understanding of Who Christ is, and what He has achieved. He was referring to what some people call the Church’s *Christology*. If the church goes wrong on the Lord Jesus, in terms of its understanding of Who He was and what He achieved, and His uniqueness, it will simply go wrong on everything else. It will go wrong on salvation, and on sin, and on doctrine. It will go wrong on interfaith ‘dialogue’. And on other things, no doubt. We really *do* need to take a special note of what Jesus said about Himself, if we are to encounter the real Jesus, and not one of our own invention. It is always wonderful to read in the Bible what others said about Jesus. Some, to be sure, called him a glutton and a drunkard, and a false teacher. But others got it exactly right as they stated with clarity Who Jesus is. One of the things

THE WAY TO THE FATHER

the author has tried to do over the years as he has read the Bible is to underline the things that others said about Jesus and that Jesus said about himself. If readers don't mind marking their Bible then this is highly recommended as an extended bible study. Some of the comments of others about Jesus will leap off the page. For examples:

Col 1:15 – **He is the image of the invisible God**

Col 1:17 – **He is before all things and in him all things hold together**

Col 1:18 – **He is the head of the body, the church**

Col 2:9 – **In Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form**

1 John 1:7 – **He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.**

So what *did* Jesus say about Himself? And why does it matter? Jesus actually said quite a lot about Himself! There are a series of statements prefixed by the two words 'I am' and it is these statements, perhaps, that give us the fullest theological picture of precisely Who and What Jesus is. Refer to Appendix 2 for a complete listing of the 'I Am' statements of Jesus. Some of the better known I AM sayings of Jesus are given immediately below in italicised text, with simple comments by this author:

I AM

The light — through which men and women can see — to see ourselves in *the* true light, as we really are. There is no other light by which we can see ourselves as God sees us. Without seeing ourselves as we truly are, we are in eternal danger.

The bread of life — of which a man may eat and never die.

THE EMPTY PROMISE OF GODISM

It is only by ‘feeding’ on Jesus that we may have eternal life. Feeding means living for Him. Living by His power. Living in His strength. Living on His words.

The gate — whoever enters through Jesus will be saved. What are we to enter? God’s kingdom, here on earth. How do we enter? By true repentance (turning away from) sin and accepting Jesus as Lord and as (all sufficient) Saviour.

The good shepherd — who lays down his life for the sheep. We know that Jesus died for us on the cross. But why did He die? Certainly, we can say because He loves His Father. But also because He loves us. And finally because if He did not die for us, then no one else could do so. No one else is good enough to pay the price of sin.

The resurrection and the Life — it is through Jesus that a disciple of Christ will ultimately be raised and having been raised will find true Life. Life with a capital ‘L’. (Revelation 22:1) **“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb”**. The passage in Revelation 22 goes on to say that His servants will reign with Him ‘for ever and ever’ (v. 5).

The Way, the truth and the Life — Jesus is *the* way, *the* truth and *the* life. He is not *a* way, *a* truth and *a* life, but *the*..... That remains a stumbling block for many in the so-called multi-cultural, multi-religion Western world today. It is inconvenient, if not downright offensive (to some) to be faced with a Saviour who has said such a thing. But that is precisely what Jesus said. We either accept it or we reject it.

To borrow a rather hackneyed British phrase, ‘you cannot have your cake and eat it’ as regards Jesus. There are some Godists who will say ‘Yes, I believe in Jesus. I believe He was a good man and did some lovely things. I even believe

THE WAY TO THE FATHER

He was God's Son'. But those same people will go on to say that they also believe in Buddha, and Mohammad, and Hinduism with its 7000+ gods. That is simply not a choice that Jesus has given us. By accepting other religious figures, you have rejected Jesus, no matter what nice things you may say about Him. We repeat, this is simply not a choice that Jesus has left open to us.

An analogy from marriage may help: when a man chooses to have an affair during his marriage, it is in a very real sense, a rejection of the wife whom he married. There are probably some men in this situation who would say 'I still love my wife'. Or even I love my wife *and* my mistress — what a loving man I am! But readers can probably see that to embark on such a course is a rejection. It's a rejection of promises to exclusivity. It's a rejection of the love that, hopefully, the wife has given. Most people can see that unfaithfulness in marriage is a real rejection of the marriage partner, even if the marriage survives. Acceptance of multiple paths to God is *ipso facto* a rejection of Christ, as the Bible itself tells us: **Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.** (Acts 4:12) Readers may also want to check out John 14:6 and Ephesians 4:1–16 in this regard. Reverting to our illustration from marriage, we must again confront this idea of unfaithfulness: in Ephesians 5 the apostle Paul speaks of marriage, in a passage that many have found to be very challenging for a whole host of reasons! In this same passage Paul says this: **After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church — for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery — but**

I am talking about Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:29–32). From the viewpoint of Godism we are bound to note that Christ’s invitation is to become *one flesh* — or we might say one body — with Himself, as husband and wife become one flesh together in marriage. To speak of multiple paths to God, or perhaps that should read *multiple partners* to God, is certainly a rejection of the exclusive nature of the relationship that Christ offers by way of salvation. This symbolic picture of Christ marrying His church is completed in Revelation: **And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, “Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.” And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.** (Revelation 19:6-8, NKJV)

As Christians we are invited to a marriage relationship with our Saviour. It is for the church-based Godist to confirm or deny that Jesus is betrothed to His church. It is for the Godist to prove beyond doubt that a good and holy God intends this to be an *open marriage*, where there are multiple and radically different paths to peace with Him. And if God does indeed mean this (heaven forbid!) then precisely what is the relationship of God to the other faiths if He is married solely to His church? Is God effectively ‘double-timing’ His intended marriage partner? The mind begins to boggle at this rather horrible idea. Nevertheless, it does seem to be the logical outcome of the overall Godist position when expressed from within the Church.

We revert for a moment to our central theme of Godism: when people invent a religion or a philosophy of religions, or

THE WAY TO THE FATHER

a synthesis or religions, and say that it doesn't really matter what people believe so long as they are sincere and have compassion, they are certainly rejecting Christ. 'Multiple religions and multiple paths' is not a choice that Jesus has left us. Jesus Himself is *the* way, Jesus Himself is *the* gate. A choice in favour of other 'ways' or other 'gates' necessarily implies that Jesus is not an *all-sufficient* Saviour, and that his death on the cross is not *the* all-sufficient penalty for sin. If the cross is not all-sufficient, and living compassionately is somehow the primary duty of a child of God, then this begins to imply that in some way we can assist God to help us into heaven; that we can in some measure earn our way to heaven. When Godism is expressed by church attending people, then they are suggesting that humans can give God a helping hand through their good works, or their faithfulness in prayer and church attendance, or their Bible reading and so on. The Bible, however, is emphatic that God needs no helping hand. Jesus *is* the way. Jesus is *the* way: **Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.** (Hebrews 9:27–28)

I AM!

In Exodus 3 we read of that amazing encounter between God and Moses, as God calls him to lead the Hebrew people who were in appalling slavery to the Egyptians. Moses, full of doubts about his own worthiness to undertake the task of rescue, asked God that fundamental question — Moses would need to tell the Israelites who had sent him to free them. What should he say? God Himself provided the answer. **And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."**

And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14, NKJV)

Does not that statement by God put a fresh perspective on the things that our Lord Jesus said? We recognise in those great I AM statements of Jesus the attributes of God Himself. God the Light, God the Life, God the Resurrection, God the Truth, God the Bread (of life). The things that Jesus was saying surely must have been recognised by those who opposed Him. And we read, don’t we, in John 8:59, that they picked up stones to kill Jesus when He said that He had seen Abraham: **Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.” Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.** (John 8:57–59, NKJV). Ultimately, Jesus’ critics recognised what He was saying, and they rejected it. Ultimately, people still recognise what Jesus is saying and the demands that He makes, and sadly many still reject Him. To be sure not always in an atheistic ‘God doesn’t exist’ sort of rejection, but too often in this ‘Jesus-Plus’ sort of ‘do it yourself’ theology where there are many avenues to God and you pick out your own personal route to get to God. Mixing, matching, sharing and borrowing from all the so-called ‘higher religions’ — and possibly some of the lower ones too! That religious *room for manoeuvre* is something that Jesus simply has not given us. A ‘DIY’ god is no god at all.

Why does it matter what the Lord Jesus said about Himself? Because Jesus reveals all truth — indeed, Jesus is Himself the Truth. The Lord Jesus is *the* way to God, not a way. We accept that, or we reject it. It is as simple

and as uncomfortable as that. We leave this section of our study on a real note of hope — indeed a note of triumph! Jesus is believable. He invited the disciples to believe on the *evidence* of the miracles that they saw. Evidence, of course, is a strong word. Many today would say ‘I’ve never seen a miracle, so how can I believe?’ Most Christians will have been privileged to see God’s hand at work in some startling ways, often in their own lives, and often in the lives of those close to them, especially in the form of answered prayer. As Christians we will have witnessed some amazing things: our own friendship with Jesus, and the Holy Spirit working in our lives and the lives of people known to us. The evidences of answered prayer are often deeply compelling and there are often so many little ‘coincidences’ (or ‘God-incidences’ as some people have called them) where we recognise the hand of God in action. These may be evidences that the world at large cannot see, let alone accept. But to a Christian they are indeed evidences of a God who is intimately interested in, and involved in, our lives. What did Jesus say? **Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.** (John 14:11–14)

We are disciples of a Saviour who responds as we seek His will and His enabling. Jesus promised that anything asked in his name will be answered in the affirmative. Again the author must confess that this statement of Jesus has given him pause for thought, in the past. Sometimes

we ask for things we believe to be in accordance with His will, things that we really feel passionate about and where we are convinced we are praying in His Spirit. And yet we seem to have no answer. We need to remember, of course, that Jesus does not always answer our prayers as we want. His oversight of our situations is better than ours. If I pray for a Rolls Royce in the name of Jesus, I'm not going to get it. Why? Because it will not advance the cause of the Kingdom. God's answers to prayer are always answers in accordance with the principle that His name is honoured and that the cause of His Kingdom is advanced. But in spite of the occasions of prayer that is not answered in the way we want or expect, most Christians would also be able to speak of many instances where prayers offered up in humble expectation, and in faith, have indeed been answered — and often answered beyond our wildest expectations.

The Power in a Name

Names can be powerful and meaningful in their own right, even causing strong emotions, as any parent who has had the difficult task of choosing a name can recognise! Many people in history have been given popular titles based on their achievements or their notoriety, titles that have become instantly recognisable as a 'celebration' of the person and what they did. So we have all heard of Alexander *the Great*, of William *the Conqueror*, of *Bloody Mary*, and of John *the Baptist*. Slightly less well known may be the English King Ethelred *the Unready*. From biblical times we encounter Judas Maccabeus — *God's Hammer*, a popular title given because of his stunning victories over the Persians. One of Jesus' own disciples is principally remembered not for what he did but for the simple fact that he was an adherent of a political movement — Simon *the Zealot*.

THE WAY TO THE FATHER

The Lord Jesus was given many titles which can be seen as both affirmations of what He was and confessions of faith in Him. W. Graham Scroggie lists in his *Guide To The Gospels* fifty-two such titles given to Jesus,⁶ but it is the simple name 'Jesus' by which the Lord is most often referred to in the Gospels — almost six hundred times, in fact. The name Jesus emphasises the real humanity of the Lord. Whilst to us it has become a sacred name, and we would consider it irreverent to give the name to any child today (though in some Latin societies this is not an uncommon practice), in New Testament times Jesus was one of the most common names for a boy. 'Jesus' is the Greek form by which the Old Testament name Joshua (e.g. as in the Book of Joshua) is translated. Whilst a common name when Jesus was born, by the second century A.D. it was rapidly dying out. Among Jews it had become a hated name whilst among Christians it was too sacred for common use.

Ordinary though the name Jesus was, it was nevertheless a significant name. In the ancient world a name could be seen as being very meaningful, often describing something about the person to whom it was given. The name Jesus was given to our Lord by the direct instruction of God (Matthew 1:21) and indeed this name might have been thought somewhat irregular by people at the time because it was customary to name eldest sons after their father. We would note, in this regard, that Jesus had no biological father, so in His name may be found some clue as to His heavenly Father. The Jewish rabbis had a saying: 'Six persons received their names before they were born, namely, Isaac, our great lawgiver Moses, Solomon, Josiah, Ishmael and the Messiah.' Jewish belief was that God would directly

⁶ *A Guide To The Gospels*, W. Graham Scroggie DD (Pickering & Inglis Ltd, 1948) p. 519.

command what the name of the Messiah must be.

In both Hebrew and Greek the name Jesus has a special meaning, being in a sense, a one word summary of the work that the Lord was sent to do. In Hebrew the name Joshua means, variously, 'Jehovah is my help' or 'Jehovah is rescue' or 'the help of Jehovah'. In Matthew 1:21 we read **“you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”** The very name Jesus, therefore, marks Him out as Saviour. 'He is God's divinely appointed and divinely sent Rescuer' writes William Barclay 'whose function it is to deliver men from their sins. He came to rescue men from the estrangement and the alienation from God which is the consequence of their past sins, and for the future to liberate them from the bondage to sin, from the moral frustration and the continuous and inevitable defeat which are the result of sin. He came to bring friendship for fear, and victory for defeat.'⁷

To the Greek mind a connection was made between the name Jesus and the verb *iasthai*, which means *to heal*. The connection between the two words is only in the sound, but the Greeks made much of the idea of Jesus as the healer of the bodies and souls of men. Jesus was the only one who could bring health to the body in its physical pain and renewal of the soul polluted by the spiritual disease of sin. It was no accident, therefore, that Jesus was given His name, for it summarises the things He came to do and which *only* He could do. He came to be the divine rescuer of men from the consequences and the grip of sin.

Jesus, Man and God

The traditional Christian view is that the baby born in Bethlehem is both God and Man, an astounding thought and a stumbling block for many, notably the Jehovah's

⁷ *Jesus As They Saw Him*, William Barclay (SCM Press, 1962) p. 12.

THE WAY TO THE FATHER

Witnesses in the western world and Muslims in the east. How did this doctrine develop? Is it biblical? What did Jesus Himself have to say? We will try to answer these questions as we evaluate whether anyone other than God, Himself, could ultimately pay the debt owed for rebellion (sin) against Himself.

The first point to make is that Jesus was a real, complete and ordinary human being. He was born like us and developed through childhood to adulthood in a completely normal way. In the Bible we read that he ate, drank, slept, sweated, became tired, felt pain and emotion. He died. He was also tempted to sin as we are, even in a quite unprecedented way by the devil himself (Luke 4:1–13), although Jesus did not surrender to the temptation and so we can say with certainty that He was without sin. Just as He taught His disciples to pray, so Jesus Himself needed to pray, to remain in close intimacy with His heavenly Father. He acknowledged He could do nothing without His Father's power and taught only what His Father had shown Him (John 8:28). In spite of all Jesus' undoubted supernatural power, He was fully dependent on His heavenly Father, so He stated plainly that He did not know the time when He would return — this was known only by His Father (Mark 13:32).

So why do Christians equate God with Jesus? The foundations of the belief are in the Bible itself — indeed it should be said that the doctrine is based on viewing the Bible as an organic whole — the doctrine is alluded to, albeit indirectly, throughout the unveiling of salvation history. It should be added, straight away, that Christians do not claim to have a perfect understanding of this Incarnation — of God becoming flesh. We can, however, say that the evidence is overwhelming as this following short study will illustrate:

What has God revealed about Himself?

One and only — Isaiah 44:6 (and Galatians 3:15–20)

Unchangeable — James 1:17

Invisible — Colossians 1:15

Infinite — 1 Kings 8:27

Holy — 1 Peter 1:15–16

Spirit — John 4:24

His unity

Deuteronomy 6: 4

Galatians 3:20 (see also verse 16)

1 Timothy 2:5

James 2:19

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Matthew 28:19 (name, not names!)

2 Corinthians 13:14

Hebrews 1:8

1 Peter 1:2

“I AM” Exodus 3:13–15 His name revealed to Moses.

Jesus uses term ‘I am’ of Himself

John 8:58 before Abraham was born, I AM!

John 6:48 the bread of life

John 10:7 the gate

John 10:11 the good shepherd

John 10:36 God’s Son

John 11:25 the resurrection and the life

John 14:10 in the Father and the Father is in me
(see also John 10:30)

John 15:1 the true vine

It is plain that Jesus was claiming the divine co-existence of God the Father and Himself, the Son. So it was that the people in His own home town rose up against Him (Luke 4:29) when He compared Himself to Elijah. **“My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.”**

said Jesus in John 5:17. The Gospel writer continues: **Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.** (John 5:17–18, NKJV). It is true that nowhere did Jesus ever say unambiguously ‘I am God’ but He nevertheless made some explicit statements leading to this conclusion. Thus **“I and the Father are one”** (John 10:30) is the most obvious, but is reinforced by, for example, **“All that belongs to the Father is mine”** (John 16:15) and **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”** (Matthew 28:18). So, whilst we read in Acts 10:36 that Jesus is Lord of all, elsewhere we read that **the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below** (Joshua 2:11) and similarly in Genesis 28:13 we read of God introducing Himself to Jacob as **“I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.”**

Since the earliest days of the church, Christian belief has been that the man Jesus is also God. Not a man with god-like qualities, nor God *appearing* in human guise, but God the eternal Logos who ‘became flesh’ (John 1:14). Four great ecumenical Councils of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. wrestled with the mysteries of the godhead and each clarified an important aspect of it. The Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) affirmed that Jesus is truly God, and the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381) confirmed that He is truly man. The Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) clarified that, although God and Man, He is one person. Finally the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) confirmed that, although one person, Jesus is both God and man perfectly. These beliefs have been reaffirmed both by Roman Catholics and the Reformers down through the centuries.

Critics of the doctrine of the Trinity often ask how God

can be in two places at once. We might as well ask how God can create a universe or how he can raise from the dead someone who has been crucified. The very question, perhaps, tries to lock the infinite God into a definition easily comprehended by limited human minds. It has been rightly observed that we can call Jesus God, but we cannot call God Jesus. God continued to control the universe in His omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence when the man Jesus was on this earth. However, in the man Jesus we meet absolutely and completely God in His personal relationship with men. We see perfectly in Jesus God in His attitude to and in His relationship with men. Although this is in the fullest sense incomprehensible to humans, this is God as He has revealed Himself: as three distinct persons — one in three and three in one.

The Way to the Father

We close this chapter by looking once again at that fundamental statement of Jesus that He is *the way to the Father*. We note that Christians were not originally known as Christians — they were actually known as the people of *the way* (Acts 19:9). It was in Antioch that followers of Jesus were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). There is an entire theology around this concept of *the way*. In summary:

- It is a word used in a moral sense, for conduct (Psalm 1:6)
- ‘Ways’ are used to describe the laws of the Lord (see Genesis 18:19; Psalm 18:21).
- ‘Way’ is used to describe customs, manners and the way of life (Genesis 6:12; Jeremiah 10:2).
- ‘Way’ is used in connection with salvation (see Acts 19:9).

A trawl through a good Bible concordance such as

THE WAY TO THE FATHER

Cruden's will see the phenomenal power in this idea of *the way*. We should hopefully be able to see that all these ideas are encompassed in what Jesus taught His disciples at the last supper. Let us remind ourselves of precisely what He said: **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”** (John 14:6). We remind ourselves once again that He did not claim to be *a way*, or *a truth*, He used the definite article: ‘the’. This alone should be compelling as we seriously and reverently consider what Jesus meant in this final statement to His disciples when He was aware that within a short time He was going to be arrested and killed. We must not simply ‘write off’ what He said. If anyone does so, what other statements are also to be written off? But this writer has certainly heard a determined Godist attempt to dismiss them in this manner: *when Jesus said that he was the way to the Father he did not mean that he was the only way to God. No, he meant that he was the only way to the Father* (full stop!) This is either astonishingly woolly thinking and inexcusably loose logic, or it is malicious. That God is Father is stated often in Scripture. If God is not Father then it is difficult to know to whom Jesus invited all His followers to pray as he taught them to address **“Our Father in Heaven”**.⁸ We have explored in chapter 6 that God is good. We have explored in chapter 7 that God is holy. God does not tell lies, nor does He mislead or obfuscate. He desires to have a relationship with all humans and He has graciously made possible a way for that to be achieved — through His Son, who in turn is our Lord if we ask Him into our lives and obey Him. Surely it would not be good to say that Jesus is *the way* if there are others available? Surely Jesus would have said something like: *I am a sure way to peace with*

⁸ See Ephesians 4:6 and John 17:1 - 3.

THE EMPTY PROMISE OF GODISM

the Father, but you know there are other ways, and in the future there will be yet more. But for the time being I invite you to follow me as a dependable way to the Father. Don't worry if you get smashed up on a cross as I am about to. When the Father decides upon other 'ways' to Himself, they won't be so demanding! The very idea is absolutely preposterous!

The author has also heard the 'problem' of John 14:6 explained away thus: *Yes Jesus is the only way to God, but Jesus will willingly admit all genuine God-seekers into eternal union with Himself providing they have not been bad, because His sacrifice on the cross covers all.* This is more subtle. It enables those who hold the view to acknowledge something which is plain from Scripture, that Jesus is God's Son and that following Him is the only way to peace with God, but it neatly sidesteps the issue of other religions. We are back to the vicar from Steptoe and Son back in 1972! By this view God's plan of salvation is so encompassing that virtually all will be saved (sometimes known as *universalism*) and only those most determinedly anti-Christ (Hitler is generally given as an example) will find themselves on the wrong-side of God's judgement. Usually this vector of thinking takes its philosophers into very uncharted waters around precisely who will be saved, and the philosophy usually degenerates into a sort of DIY theology, always with a 'happy ending' of salvation for virtually all — and always far removed from the revelation of Scripture. Rather than pursue these ideas further we will conclude with this: those who think this must inevitably hold a low view of God, as suggested in the diagram in Appendix 1. There is no biblical basis for the idea that those of *the religions* can rely upon Christ's sacrifice for eternal salvation.