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# Introduction

Each time I have written a book I have said to myself, in some form or other, “Well, this is it. If I can say what I want to say on this subject, I would satisfy a life intention.” And I have meant it. I did not mean, of course, that I had the presumption to think I was going to say the last word on that subject, or the best word. That would be folly. But I did mean that for me this subject is it—if I could say and live what I am writing, then it would meet my deepest need—and the need of others.

But as I look back I see that each book, while meeting a need of my own, and possibly the needs of others, did not move to the very Center, nor did it comprehend the Whole, gathering up the Christian faith into a total concept. This book, I believe, comes nearer the Center and more nearly comprehends the Whole than any I have written. At the close I shall probably send it forth with a sigh, “Well, I haven’t said it! I have picked up some pebbles along the beach, but the great ocean depths are yet to be explored.” While I shall be dissatisfied with my offering, I shall be convinced that whether I have said it or not, the thing itself is the Center—the Word Became Flesh is the Center. This is it! And that circumference is the working out of that Word Became Flesh in the sum total of life.

If I were to put my finger on the most important verse in Scripture, I would unhesitatingly put my finger on this one: “And the Word became flesh.” The whole passage reads this way:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. . . . And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (John 1:14-18)

This verse—“the Word became flesh”—is the Great Divide. In all other religions it is Word became word—a philosophy, a moralism, a system, a technique, but for all time and all people everywhere, “the Word became flesh”—the Idea became Fact.

As a missionary and an evangelist for over half a century, I have stood amid the thought currents of the world—“where cross the crowded ways of life.” These “ways of life” meet in India as in no other place in the world. Here men take religion

seriously, ready to live and die for it. And here in large measure, the religious battle of the world is being fought. Among the great philosophical nations of the world—Greece, India, and China—India alone stands and fights for her ways of life. Greece has produced her philosophers, but go to Greece today—you will be shown monuments and archaeological ruins, but no one will debate with you on Mars’ Hill the relative merits of the various philosophies of ancient Greece. A Mecca for photographers, but not for pilgrims. In China the temples are places of picnics or now, under the Communists, places of indoctrination for Marxism. Apparently, the religious issues are wiped out.

But in India it is different. There, the old faiths have vitality still. It is true that many of the gods are worm-eaten. In India the gods lose their vitality and vigor every fifty or sixty years and have to be revived by certain reviving ceremonies and rites. Said a Hindu to me: “Ishwara [God] is growing old and decrepit, is not of much use to us now.” While there is a decay of temple Hinduism, nevertheless philosophical Hinduism is still strong and militant and even invades the West. Even in our Christian Ashrams in America, I get the questions: “What do you think of Reincarnation and Karma?” “Are we one with God, as Vedanta says, or more truly stated, Are we God?”

The reaction of India to the Christian gospel has gone through three stages: (1) It isn’t true. (2) It isn’t new. (3) It isn’t you. The first stage was short-lived. The gospel was so self-verifying to the human mind that it could not be waved out as untrue. The second stage, “It isn’t new,” has lingered and is still in vogue—“Everything you have in your faith is found in our sacred books.” The third stage, “It isn’t you”—“You don’t live it,” is here and is the usual argument against the Christian gospel. There we must humbly acknowledge the truth of what they say. They have a point—a real one. The stage India is in, at present, is a combination of “It isn’t new” and “It isn’t you.”

I have lived with this combination for years. Everything I have presented in the Christian gospel has been met by a bland reply: “Yes, what you say is good; we have the same in our sacred books.” When I arrived in India fifty-four years ago and was traveling from Bombay to Lucknow, I found myself in a compartment with an educated Muslim, and I said to myself: “I am a missionary. I’d better go to work.” So I read him the whole of the Sermon on the Mount. When I finished, he quietly replied: “Yes, we have the same thing in the Koran.” Whether it was true or not was beside the point for him—he must get rid of the uniqueness of the Christian faith.

When I put up the teaching concerning turning the other cheek and going the second mile and loving your enemies, the Hindus would reply: “Yes, our sacred books tell us that we are to be like the sandalwood tree, which, when smitten by the ax, pours its perfume upon the ax that smites it.” I had to acknowledge its beauty while inwardly raising the question, “Then where is the uniqueness of the Christian faith?” When I came to the cross, which certainly must be unique, I thought, I would be met by the statement of the Rig Veda: “Prajapati, the Lord of creatures was himself their

sacrifice—he gave himself for them,” and the blue-throated Shiva (one of the Hindu trinity) “drank poison that we might ambrosia taste,” and the parch of blue on his throat is the lodged poison. Everything I brought up had its parallel. Then where was the uniqueness? I was puzzled.

Then it dawned on me. In all these statements from the Hindu scriptures, it was the Word became word—the sandalwood illustration was an exhortation, not an exhibition; Prajapati, the Lord of creatures, giving himself for men in sacrifice was a statement with no historical basis; and the blue-throated Shiva was a legend, a myth. In Jesus, the Word had become flesh—“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” And Jesus, the Lord of Creatures, did give himself for them on a cross. And he did drink the poison of our sin that we might taste the ambrosia of forgiveness and a new life.

The center of the faith of the modern Hindu is the Bhagavad-Gita where Krishna, a Hindu divinity, on the eve of a battle says things that strangely parallel the Christian faith. But here, too, it is the Word become word—it is a philosophical discourse put into the mouth of a divine Krishna who never lived. The historical Krishna is hardly the kind of character who could be looked up to and emulated. The philosophical Krishna is the Word become word—a philosophy or moralism.

Then I got hold of this difference: in all other religions it is the Word become word, but only in Jesus Christ did the Word become flesh. Then everything fell into its place. I had the Key, and this Key fitted everything in East and West. In the West we have studies in comparative religion in our theological seminaries and universities. In these courses the teachings of the various religions are outlined, and parallels are pointed out. The Christian faith emerges a little more moral, a little more consistent in its view of God and man, and a little higher in general, but nothing very unique. So many students came out of these institutions with little or no convictions and with nothing to preach—nothing except a philosophy or moralism, but no gospel, no Good News. That is the paralysis that lies upon the Christian ministry; for the most part they are preaching the Word become word—a moralism, an exhortation to be good. Hence the barrenness.

I was being interviewed on TV by a brilliant commentator, who came to the point by saying: “You go throughout the world preaching. What do you have to preach that others do not have?” It was a good question—and valid. Just what did I have? The answer was simple and simply given: “I have Jesus Christ—the Word become flesh.”

This brought a difference not only in degree, but in kind. The Christian faith is not just a little better than other faiths—a little more moral, more free from contradictory elements, more lofty in its conceptions. It is that, but it is more—it is different in kind. Religions are our search for God. The gospel is God’s search for us. Therefore, there are many religions, but only one gospel. Religions are the Word become word; the gospel is the Word become flesh.

This verse, “And the Word became flesh,” sets the Gospel off in a class by itself. And yet while it is in a class by itself, a *sui generis*, nevertheless it relates it to every-

thing—God, life, the material everything. For it is planted in life—spiritual, material, social. But planted in life, it is different, apart, unique. No wonder William Barclay, perhaps the greatest authority on John’s Gospel, could say, “Here we come to the sentence for the sake of which John wrote the Fourth Gospel: ‘The Word became flesh.’” And then goes on:

Augustine afterwards said that in his pre-Christian days he had read and studied the great pagan philosophers and their writings, ... but he had never read that “the Word became flesh.” The one thing that no Greek would ever have dreamed of was that God could take a body. To the Greek the body was an evil, a prison-house in which the soul was shackled, a tomb in which the spirit was confined. Plutarch, the wise old Greek, did not even believe that God could control the happenings of this world directly; He had to do it by deputies and intermediaries, for as Plutarch saw it, it was nothing less than blasphemy to involve God in the affairs of the world. Philo could never have said it. He said: “The life of God has not descended to us; nor has it come as far as the necessities of the body.” The great Roman Stoic Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, [said] “Despite the flesh—blood and bones and a net-work, a twisted skein of nerves and veins and arteries.” “The composition of the whole body is under corruption.”

And yet, in the face of all that—the highest thought of the day—the Gospel quietly says: “And the Word became flesh.” It reversed everything and revealed Everything. No wonder Barclay could add: “It might well be held that this is the greatest verse in the whole New Testament.”<sup>1</sup>

Without this verse the Christian faith is the Word become word—an idea, a philosophy, a moralism; with it the Christian faith is the Word become flesh, a fact—a Redemptive Fact, the Supreme Fact.

Compared with this, the differences between the Christian way and other ways are marginal and indecisive, but this is central and decisive. And compared with this, the questions of the manifestations of the Christian faith are marginal and indecisive: If the manifestation of the Christian faith is not the Word become flesh—a decision—then it is the Word become word—a discussion, hence sub-Christian.

This book will deal with these two phases: Is this idea the Word become word or the Word become flesh? And is this manifestation of the idea of the Word become word or the Word become flesh? The one deals with faith and the other with life, and the touchstone in both cases is—the Word became flesh.

Someone asked me which of my twenty-three books I liked the best. My reply was: “Please don’t make me choose between my babies.” But if I were asked as to the message I would like to leave, I would unhesitatingly choose the message of *The Way*. My readers apparently have not agreed with me, for it hasn’t sold as much, for instance, as *The Christ of the Indian Road* and *Abundant Living*, each of which has sold over a million copies. I must not have said it too well. But the message of *The Way* seems to me the most important thing I have been trying to say through the

years. If the Christian faith is written not merely in the Scripture but also into the nature of things, then that is not only important—it is decisive. In this present book, I have reiterated the message of *The Way* in the first part of the book, since it fitted the present theme, hoping that this re-emphasis would call attention again to what I consider the most important thing in the Christian faith, namely, that the Christian Way is *the Way* and that “Way” is written not merely in texts of Scripture but into the texture of our beings.

I have used repeatedly in this book the phrases, “The Word became word,” and “The Word became flesh.” I have done so deliberately, for these phrases side by side bring into focus the issues in this book and in the world of faith. If we can make the transition from one to the other, we can be saved—we and our world. If not? Well, “The Word become word” has run its course and is near bankruptcy. Nothing can save us except that transition to “The Word became flesh.”

The question arose in my mind: Shall I make this a book reading straight through without a daily division for daily devotion, or shall I make it a devotional book—a page a day? The publishers advised the devotional form. And rightly, I believe. For in the devotional, one reads not merely for information, but for transformation. One reads to become a better person; consciously or unconsciously we want the literature to become life, the worship to become work. In other words we want the Word to become flesh. So the devotional is more in line with the title. It can be read straight through for information, for one there runs through the whole, but it can also be read for transformation. And that is the real purpose of this book—transformation to individuals and society. To discuss “the Word became flesh” as a proposition is to make the Word become theology; but to discuss it, not as a proposition, but as a proposal for change and action—that would be nearer “the Word became flesh.”

If it means to the reader what it is increasingly meaning to the writer, then the purpose of this book will be accomplished. What for me began as a question is now turning into a quest—a quest to embody in some way, however faint and imperfect, the Word become flesh.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel of John*, tr. William Barclay (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955); pages I, 44–46.



**WHY “THE WORD”?**

The phrase “the Word” was not really indigenous to Hebrew thought. It used “the word of the Lord,” “Thy word,” but not “the Word” as a separate entity. But it was indigenous to Greek thought, so the early Christian writers did not hesitate to reach out beyond the Hebrew heritage and take hold of any conception to express that which was beyond expression. For they saw that the gospel was bursting with universal meanings and could not be confined to the Jewish language and culture to express that which was beyond language and culture. A universal faith would require a universal medium for its expression. That universal medium could only be life—the one thing universal to us all. But even that universal “life” would be insufficient—it would have to be “Life,” the Life of God and us, the Life of the God-person. The Word would have to become flesh.

But on the way to reveal the Word become flesh, the writer would use “the Word,” for it is expressive: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Why was Jesus here called “the Word”? Well, one’s words are the expression of the hidden thought. If you should stand before an audience without a word, hoping that the audience would get your thought, intuitively and immediately, it would end in futility. Only as the hidden thought is put into a word is the thought communicated.

Here is the hidden God, like the hidden thought, and we cannot know what God is like unless God communicates through a word. If one says, “I can know God in my heart intuitively and immediately, without the meditation of a word,” then the answer is: “But your ‘heart’ then becomes the medium of communication and knowing the heart as one does with its sin and crosscurrents and cross-conceptions we know it is a very unsafe medium for the revelation of God.” God must be revealed.

**O God, my Father, You are the hidden God. How can I, bounded by my senses, know you except as you shall show yourself to me? I cannot read you unless I get a Word from you. But I know that Word cannot be verbal, for you are not verbal, but vital. Amen.**

*AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: If the word is the expression of the hidden thought, I shall be, in some real way, the expression of the hidden God.*

**THE WORD IS THE CHILD OF THE THOUGHT**

We saw yesterday that without a word, the thought cannot be expressed. The word is the thought become available. When you get hold of my words, you say: “Now I have hold of his thought.” The words are the thought mediated to us. The words are not a third something standing between you and the thought—they are the thought become available. The one who takes hold of the words takes hold of the thought itself. The word and the thought are one.

Here is the hidden God, and God is expressed through the Word. When you take hold of that Word, you do not take hold of something standing between you and God—that Word, Jesus, is God available. Jesus is not a third person standing between you and God. When you take hold of Jesus, you take hold of God. Jesus is a mediator only in the sense that he mediates God to you. When you know Jesus, you know God. Just as the thought and the word are one, so Jesus could say, “I and the Father are one.”

But the word is the offspring, or child, of the thought. So Jesus is the offspring, or Son, of the Father. And just as the thought is greater than the word, for all expression means limitation—you have to look around to get the right word to express the thought—so the unexpressed God is greater than the expressed God. God had to be limited in coming to us in human form. So Jesus could say, “The Father is greater than I.”

There seems to be a contradiction: “I and the Father are one,” and “The Father is greater than I.” But there is not. Just as the thought and the word are one, so God, the Thought, and Jesus, the Word, are one. But just as the unexpressed thought is greater than the expressed thought, the word, so God the Father, the unexpressed, is greater than God the Son, the expressed. They are one, and yet the Father is greater than the Son. For God was self-limited when God became human.

Did God have to become human to show himself?

**O God, our Father, we are at the very crux of our quest—did you have to become human? Help us not to make a misstep here, for we go astray in life if we go astray in thought. May we think your thoughts after you, for we would be your life after you. Amen.**

*AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I offer my mind, my soul, my flesh to reveal God to someone today.*

## **DID GOD HAVE TO BECOME HUMAN?**

We ended yesterday with the question: Did God have to become human to show himself? Wasn't there some other way? A less expensive way? A less humiliating way?

Well, there are number of ways God might be revealed. God can be revealed through nature. But not perfectly. I look up to God through nature and come to the conclusion that God is Law. But the revelation is a very impersonal kind of law. The discovery of atomic energy has driven many thoughtful scientists to God. From whence this awe-ful energy, so awe-ful and so law-abiding? All this drives humans to a dependable Creator. But that energy tells you little about the character of God except God's might. Said a chaplain, "That plane holds more power than was expended in the last war." But the revelation of God's character in an atom is questionable. That atom can burn millions to ashes, or it can lift the life of millions to a higher level if it is harnessed to the collective good. The character of God revealed in the atom is morally neutral. The song we sing, "How great Thou art," tells of looking at the stars and hearing the rolling thunder and concluding that God is "is great," but "great" in what? The stars look down on us, indifferent as to our moral character, and the rolling thunder and the flashing lightning may hit a brothel or a baby with no moral discrimination. So nature's revelation of God is equivocal.

Then God is revealed through prophet and teacher and sage, but not perfectly, for the medium of revelation is imperfect and the message coming through that imperfect medium partakes of that imperfection. Besides, it is the Word become word—verbal.

Then there is the method of revelation through a book. We must be grateful for every inspired word which has come down to us through a book—grateful, but not satisfied. For two reasons: first, a book is impersonal, and God is the infinitely Personal; second, a book is the Word become word, not the Word become flesh.

**O Father, we search through various ways and various media to find you. For we are homesick for you. For you are our Home, and apart from you we wander from thing to thing and from place to place seeking, seeking. Our hearts are restless till they rest in you. Amen.**

*AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I shall be an imperfect medium, but nevertheless a medium, through which people can see God today.*

## **CAN GOD BE REVEALED PERFECTLY THROUGH A BOOK?**

We paused yesterday to ask whether God could be revealed perfectly through a book, however sacred it may be. The Sikhs of India treat the Granth Sahib, their sacred book, as though it were a person. They fan it in hot weather, offer it food, and put it to sleep under mosquito curtains. To them, it is a person. But however they may attempt to make the book personal, it is still impersonal. The Vedas of the Hindus are supposedly eternal, but we know that oftentimes there are historical references in them. They are of time and are impersonal. The Koran is supposedly dictated by God, but if it were, it would still be impersonal; hence the Word become word. There are those in my day who put out books with such titles as *God Speaking*, which were supposedly dictated to the listening scribes. From the contents, it would seem that they are, at their best, the highest thoughts of the writers translated as the voice of God, for nothing beyond high human thinking has been revealed—and some of it is not even high—it is very, very ordinary. But if it were dictated by God, it would still be the Word become word.

Then there are those who in religious circles sit in séances waiting for some word from God through a medium, who in turn is supposed to get some word from a person in the next life. Apparently, what has “come through” has added little or nothing to our knowledge of God, and little or nothing to our knowledge of the hereafter—nothing except what the human mind would project into the future and call revelation. In any case, if it were real it would be inadequate, for it would be the Word become word and, a very secondhand or thirdhand word at that. But there are those who go into contortions and trances and speak supposedly as God. “Who is he?” I inquired of a disciple when people at every railway station fell at the feet of a “holy man.” “He is God. He can tell you anything.” But I could see he was a spastic and his contortions of speech were supposed to be the result of divine possession.

**O God, we project ourselves and our thoughts into the heavens and call it your voice and your revelation. We are sick, nigh unto death, at the echoes of our own voices. We want some authentic Word from you—the Word for which we have been waiting. Amen.**

*AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Regarding God, I shall be not a second-hander but a first-hander.*

**SEEING GOD THROUGH IMPERFECT MEDIA**

We are considering how God could be revealed perfectly. We continue to look at the question of whether a book can be a perfect revelation. Words get meaning from the life that surrounds them. If I should use the word “home” before an audience, to some it would mean “heaven,” to some “hell,” according to the life which surrounded the word. Literature can never rise higher than life. For life puts content and meaning into the literature. Suppose God should give us a book from heaven with all God’s will written into it—would that be a perfect revelation of God? Hardly. For we would read into those words our highest experience of those words. I would see the word “love” in the book, and I would read into it my highest experience of love. But my highest experience of love is not love—it is my highest experience of love, which is partial, incomplete. I would see the word “purity” in the book, and I would read into it my highest experience of purity; but my highest experience of purity is not purity. I would see the word “God,” and I would read into it my highest experience of God; but my highest experience of God is not God.

I would pull these words to the level of my highest experience, and so would you, so the book would not be so much a revelation of God as a revelation of us. What then do we need for a perfect revelation of God? A life must come among us—a Divine Life, which will lift these words from the level to which we have dragged them and put a new content into them—a Divine Content through the Divine Illustration. We would then no longer see these words through what we are but through what God is. We think that has happened. A Life came among us and lived publicly for thirty-three years. We no longer see the word “love” in the light of our poor, partial love, but in the light of a Love that prayed for enemies upon a cross: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” The Word of love became flesh.

**O, Father, we see you faintly and distortedly through the lattice of nature and through the lattice of your followers, but we begin to see you through the Life of your Son. And what we see sets our hearts on fire to see more and yet more. In Jesus’ name. Amen.**

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: *My light may be poor, but it will be light, not darkness.*

## **THE QUEST FOR THE PERFECT REVELATION**

We continue our quest for the Perfect Revelation. If God should give us a book from heaven as the revelation of God, we would read into those words our highest experience of those words. But now the new possibility has come. I can see those words through a Divine Illustration of the meaning of those words. I see the word “purity,” and I no longer read into it my highest experience of purity, which is partial and incomplete, but I see it in the light of a Purity which shared my temptations, minus my falls. I see Purity—the Real Thing. I no longer see the word “God” in the light of my imagination of God, but in the light of this authentic uncovering of the nature of God in understandable terms—human terms. I look up through Jesus, the Son, and I now know what God is like. God is a Christ-like God, and if so, then God is a good God and trustable. I could think of nothing higher; I could be content with nothing less.

If God isn't like Jesus, I am not interested in God. For the highest I know in the realm of character is to be Christlike. I said that in India, and a Hindu wrote to me: “You took my breath away. This is Bhakti [devotion] par excellence. You said you wouldn't be interested in God if He were not like your Guru [Master].” But my Guru is no human Guru—he is God's authentic self-revelation. When the disciples said, “Show us the Father, and it sufficeth us,” Jesus quietly said: “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:8-9, KJV), and it was one of the greatest moments in human history. In the Congo when those in charge were about to pull up the idol from the idol-pit, the people fell back, terror-stricken. They cried: “If we look on the face of ‘our father,’ we will die.” But here, as we look on the face of “Our Father” in the person of Jesus, then we do not die, but live! We see God not terrible but tender, not forbidding but forgiving. We see in Jesus God as he is—really is!

**O Son of God, we thank you for showing us the Father. We would never have known what God was like had we not looked on your face. Seeing God in your face, we rest not satisfied but stirred—stirred to be like what we see in you. Read our gratitude. Amen.**

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: *Perhaps I cannot be authoritative, but I can be authentic.*

**THE SILENCE OF ETERNITY HAS BEEN BROKEN**

We come now to gather together what we have been saying this week. We must reject as inadequate or inaccurate the attempts to find God through nature—the nature worshipers; the attempt to find God within ourselves—the “I” worshipers; the attempt to find God through teachers, gurus, priests—the human worshipers; the attempt to find God in legalism—the written law worshipers; the attempt to find God in slogans and affirmation—the cult of the Positive, the Positive worshipers; the attempt to find God in the quiet of submissiveness—the worshipers of Silence, of Quietism. In any of these you may find glimpses of God, but if you are to see God face to face you must see God in the face of Jesus Christ. For Jesus is God approachable, God available, God simplified, God lovable. The Word has become flesh.

There was, and is, no other way for God to be revealed except in understandable terms, human terms. God had to show his character where your character and mine are wrought out, namely, in the stream of human history. The Word had to become flesh, or else not be the Word; it would be something else—words!

Lao-tse, the great Chinese philosopher said: “The Word that can be uttered is not the Divine word; that Word is Silence.” He is right, in a way, for the Divine Word cannot be uttered. That would be the Word become word. But the alternative is not silence. Lao-tse had to say the alternative was silence for he knew of no Word become flesh, knew no Jesus Christ. So it had to be silence. But “the silence of eternity” has been broken, it has been interrupted by love, by the appearance of Incarnate Love—Jesus.

The statement of Lao-tse, himself a philosopher, that the Word that can be uttered is not the Divine Word, sweeps from the board of adequacy all attempts to utter the Divine Word through philosophy, laws, reason, and theology. They are all the Word become word. The only method of revelation is the Word become flesh.

**O God, my Father, I thank you that when all other ways were inadequate, you opened the way to us. When we couldn’t come to you, you came to us, came to us in lowly form, human form. And now we can come to you through the Way. Amen.**

*AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: The Silence of Eternity shall become revealed in me today.*