

Questions of Life

NICKY GUMBEL



Alpha

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Illustrations by Charlie Mackesy

p. 54: Image of William Holman Hunt's The Light of the World is © Dean and Chapter of St. Paul's Cathedral.

ISBN 978-1-938-3-2878-7

First Printing 2007 / Printed in the United States of America

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Preface

When *Questions of Life* was first published over twenty years ago, there were only a handful of Alphas running. As I write this, over 29 million people have completed Alpha in 169 countries around the world.

Much of this is due to the extraordinary dedication, adaptability, and hard work of Nicky Gumbel. But he would be the first to point out that there is another crucial factor: the Spirit of God seems to have adopted Alpha and has blown it along.

And this book *Questions of Life* has been central to the whole phenomenon. As Alpha in book form, it has become an international bestseller through which countless thousands have been introduced to Jesus Christ for the first time.

In it, Nicky provides some answers to the hunger and growing hope in every human heart that somewhere, somehow, there may be found a contemporary answer to the timeless question, “What is truth and how and where can we discover it?”

Questions of Life remains a sympathetic, fascinating, and immensely readable introduction to Jesus Christ—still the most attractive and captivating person it is possible to know. Nicky Gumbel’s intelligent, well-researched and informed approach ensures that the search for Truth fully engages our minds as well as our hearts.

I have no hesitation in continuing to recommend this readable and important book.

Sandy Millar

Foreword

There is today a new interest in the Christian faith, and more specifically in the Person of Jesus. It has been over 2,000 years since His birth, yet He has more than 2.2 billion followers. Christians will always be fascinated by the founder of their faith and the Lord of their lives. But now, there is a resurgence of interest among non-churchgoers.

Many are asking questions about Jesus. Was he merely a man or is He the Son of God? If He is the latter, what are the implications for our everyday lives?

This book attempts to answer some of the key questions at the heart of the Christian faith. It is based on Alpha, which is designed for non-churchgoers, those seeking to find out more about Christianity, and those who have recently come to faith in Jesus Christ. We have watched in astonishment as the number of Alphas around the world has increased to over 66,000. Millions of men and women of all ages have come to Alpha full of questions about Christianity, and have found God as their Father, Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord, and the Holy Spirit as the one who comes to live within them.

I would like to thank all the people who have read and offered constructive criticisms on the manuscripts, and Cressida Inglis-Jones who typed the original manuscript and almost all the revisions with great speed, efficiency, and patience.

Nicky Gumbel

Is There More to Life than This?

"LOCHNESS or
NOTHINGNESS
today Gerald?"



For many years I had three objections to the Christian faith. First, I thought it was boring. I went to chapel at school and found it very dull. I had sympathy with the novelist Robert Louis Stevenson who once entered in his diary, as if recording an extraordinary phenomenon, "I have been to church today, and am not depressed." My impression of the Christian faith was that it was dreary and uninspiring.

Second, it seemed to me to be untrue. I had intellectual objections to the Christian faith and described myself as an atheist. In fact, I rather pretentiously called myself a logical determinist. When I was fourteen I

wrote an essay for Religious Studies in which I tried to destroy the whole of Christianity and disprove the existence of God. Rather surprisingly, it was put forward for a prize! I had knock-down arguments against the Christian faith and rather enjoyed arguing with Christians, on each occasion thinking I had won some great victory.

Third, I thought that Christianity was irrelevant to my life. I could not see how something that happened 2,000 years ago and 2,000 miles away in the Middle East could have any relevance to my life today. At school we often used to sing that much-loved hymn “Jerusalem,” which asks, “And did those feet in ancient time walk upon England’s mountains green?” We all knew that the answer was, “No, they did not.” Jesus never came anywhere near England!

With hindsight, I realize that it was partly my fault as I never really listened and so did not know very much about the Christian faith. There are many people today who don’t know much about Jesus Christ, or what He did, or anything else about Christianity.

One hospital chaplain listed some of the replies he was given to the question, “Would you like Holy Communion?” These are some of the answers:

“No thanks, I’m Church of England.”

“No thanks, I asked for cornflakes.”

“No thanks, I’ve never been circumcised.”¹

Not only was I ignorant about the Christian faith but also, looking back, my experience was that something was missing.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes of the hunger of every human heart:

The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we grasped

at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife [or husband] may be a good wife [or husband], and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job: but something has evaded us.²

Men and women were created to live in a relationship with God. Without that relationship there will always be a hunger, an emptiness, a feeling that something is missing. Bernard Levin, perhaps the greatest columnist of his generation, once wrote an article called “Life’s Great Riddle, and No Time to Find its Meaning.” In it he said that in spite of his great success he feared he might have “wasted reality in the chase of a dream.”

To put it bluntly, have I time to discover why I was born before I die?... I have not managed to answer the question yet, and however many years I have before me they are certainly not as many as there are behind. There is an obvious danger in leaving it too late... why do I have to know why I was born? Because, of course, I am unable to believe that it was an accident; and if it wasn’t one, it must have a meaning.³

He was not religious, writing on one occasion, “For the fourteen thousandth time, I am not a Christian.” Yet he seemed only too aware of the inadequate answers to the meaning of life. He wrote some years earlier:

Countries like ours are full of people who have all the material comforts they desire, together with such non-material blessings as a happy family, and yet lead lives of quiet, and at times noisy, desperation, understanding nothing but the fact that there is a hole inside them and that however much food and drink they pour into it, however many motor cars and television sets they stuff it with, however many well-balanced children and loyal friends they parade around the edges of it... it aches.⁴



Jesus Christ said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). The implications of His claim were as startling in the first century as they are in the twenty-first. So what are we to make of it?

Direction for a lost world

First, Jesus said, “I am the way.” When their children were younger, some friends of mine had a Swedish nanny. She was struggling to learn the English language, and still hadn’t quite mastered all the English idioms. On one occasion, an argument broke out between the children in their bedroom. The nanny rushed upstairs to sort it out, and what she meant to say was, “What on earth are you doing?” What she actually said was, “What are you doing on earth?” This is a very good question, “What are we doing on earth?”

In 1879, Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, wrote a book called *A Confession*, in which he tells the story of his search for meaning and purpose in life. He had rejected Christianity as a child. When he left university he sought to get as much pleasure out of life as he could. He threw himself into the social worlds of Moscow and St. Petersburg, drinking heavily, sleeping around, gambling, and leading a wild life. But he found it did not satisfy him.

Then he became ambitious for money. He had inherited an estate

and made a large amount of money out of his books. Yet that did not satisfy him either. He sought success, fame, and importance. These he also achieved. He wrote what the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes as “one of the two or three greatest novels in world literature.” But he was left asking the question, “Well fine... so what?”, to which he had no answer.

Then he became ambitious for his family—to give them the best possible life. He married in 1862 and had a kind, loving wife and thirteen children (which, he said, distracted him from any search for the overall meaning of life!). He had achieved all his ambitions and was surrounded by what appeared to be complete happiness. And yet one question brought him to the verge of suicide: “Is there any meaning in my life which will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?”

He searched for the answer in every field of science and philosophy. The only answer he could find to the question, “Why do I live?” was that “in the infinity of space and the infinity of time infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity.” Not finding that answer hugely satisfying, he looked round at his contemporaries and found that many of them were simply avoiding the issue. Eventually he found among Russia’s peasants the answer he had been looking for: their faith in Jesus Christ. He wrote after his conversion that he was “led inescapably by experience to the conviction that only... faith give[s] life a meaning.”⁵

Over 100 years later, nothing has changed. Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of the rock group Queen, who died at the end of 1991, wrote in one of his last songs on *The Miracle* album, “Does anybody know what we are living for?” In spite of the fact that he had amassed a huge fortune and had attracted thousands of fans, he admitted in an interview shortly before his death that he was desperately lonely. He said, “You can have everything in the world and still be the loneliest man, and that is the most bitter type of loneliness. Success has brought me world idolization and millions of pounds, but it’s prevented me from having the one thing we all need—a loving, ongoing relationship.”

Freddie Mercury was right to speak of an “ongoing relationship” as the one thing we all need. Ultimately there is only one relationship that is completely loving and totally ongoing: a relationship with God. Jesus

said, “I am the way.” He is the only One who can bring us into that relationship with God that goes on into eternity.

When I was a child our family had an old black and white television set. We could never get a very good picture: on one occasion, during the World Cup final in 1966, just as England was about to score a goal, the screen went fuzzy, disintegrating into lines. We were quite happy with it since we did not know anything different. We tried to improve the picture by treading on certain floorboards and standing in certain places near it. Then we discovered that what the television needed was an outside aerial! Suddenly we could get clear and distinct pictures. Our enjoyment was transformed. Life without a relationship with Jesus Christ is like the television without the aerial. Some people seem quite happy, because they don’t realize that there is something better. Once we have experienced a relationship with God, the purpose and meaning of life become clearer. We see things that we have never seen and we understand why we were made.

Reality in a confused world

Second, Jesus said, “I am the truth.” Sometimes people say, “It does not matter what you believe so long as you are sincere.” But it is possible to be sincerely wrong. Adolf Hitler was sincerely wrong. His beliefs destroyed the lives of millions of people. The Yorkshire Ripper believed that he was doing God’s will when he killed prostitutes. He too was sincerely wrong. His beliefs affected his behavior. These are extreme examples, but they make the point that it matters a great deal what we believe, because what we believe will dictate how we live.

Other people’s response to a Christian may be, “It’s great for you, but it is not for me.” This is not a logical position. If Christianity is true, it is of vital importance to every one of us. If it is not true, it is not “great for us”—it is very sad, and it means that Christians are deluded. As the writer and scholar C. S. Lewis put it, “Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”⁶



Is it true? Is there any evidence to support Jesus' claim to be "the truth"? These are some of the questions we will be looking at later in this book. The lynchpin of Christianity is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and for that there is ample evidence, which we will look at in the following chapter.

I don't think I ever realized how much the course of history has been shaped by people who believed that Jesus really was "the truth." Lord Denning, widely thought of as one of the greatest legal minds in the twentieth century, was for nearly forty years president of the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship. He had applied his legendary powers of analysis to the historical evidence for Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection and concluded that Christianity was true.

I had not appreciated either that some of the most sophisticated philosophers the West has ever produced—Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Pascal, Leibniz, Kant—were all committed Christians. In fact, two of the most influential philosophers living today, Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre, have both built a great deal of their work on a deep commitment to Jesus Christ.

Nor had I realized how many of the pioneers of modern science were Christian believers: Galileo, Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, Mendel, Pasteur, and Maxwell. This is still true of leading scientists today. Francis Collins, director of the Human Genome Project and one of the most

respected geneticists in the world, tells of a mountain walk during which he was so overwhelmed by the beauty of creation that, in his words, “I knelt in the dewy grass as the sun rose and surrendered to Jesus Christ.”⁷

These words highlight the fact that when Jesus said, “I am the truth,” He meant more than just intellectual truth. He meant a personal knowledge of someone who fully embodies that truth. The Hebrew understanding of truth is one of experienced reality. It’s the difference between knowing something in your head and knowing it in your heart.

Suppose that before I met my wife Pippa I had read a book about her. Then, after I had finished reading the book I thought, “She sounds like an amazing woman. This is the person I want to marry.” There would be a big difference in my state of mind then—intellectually convinced that she was a wonderful person—and my state of mind now after the experience of many years of marriage from which I can say, “I know she is a wonderful person.” When a Christian says, in relation to their faith, “I know Jesus is the truth,” they do not mean only that they know intellectually that He is the truth, but that they have experienced Jesus as the truth.

Life in a dark world

Third, Jesus said, “I am the life.” The Christian view has always been that people are made in the image of God. As a result there is something noble about every human being. This conviction has been the driving force behind many of the great social reformers, from William Wilberforce to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Desmond Tutu. But there is also another side to the coin.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Russian writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature and was converted to Christianity when in exile from the Soviet Union, said, “The line separating good and evil passes, not through states, nor through classes, nor between political parties.... but right through every human heart and through all human hearts.”⁸

I used to think I was a “nice” person—because I didn’t rob banks or commit other serious crimes. Only when I began to see my life alongside the life of Jesus Christ did I realize how much was wrong.

"God's image?
...on a bad day"



We all need forgiveness and it can only be found in Christ. Marghanita Laski, a humanist, made an amazing confession during a TV debate with a Christian. She said, "What I envy about you Christians is your forgiveness." Then she added rather wistfully, "I have no one to forgive me."⁹

What Jesus did when He was crucified for us was to pay the penalty for all the things that we have done wrong. We will look at this subject in more detail in chapter 3. There, we will see that He died to remove our guilt and to set us free from addictions, fear, and death.

Jesus not only died for us, He was also raised from the dead for us. In this act He defeated death. Jesus came to bring us "eternal life." Eternal life is a quality of life which comes from living in a relationship with God (John 17:3). Jesus never promised anyone an easy life, but He promised fullness of life (John 10:10).

Alice Cooper, the veteran rock musician, once gave an interview to *The Sunday Times* headlined: "Alice Cooper has a dark secret—the 53-year-old rocker is a Christian." In this interview, he describes his conversion to Christianity. "It hasn't been easy combining religion and rock. It's the most rebellious thing I've ever done. Drinking beer is easy. Trashing your hotel room is easy. But being a Christian, that's a tough call. That's real rebellion."¹⁰

The theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich described the human condition as one that always involves three fears: fear of guilt, fear of meaninglessness, and fear of death. Jesus Christ meets each of these fears head on, because He is “the way and the truth and the life.”¹¹

“.. and fear of life
without Chocolate ”

