

A Confession which Defines a Christian Life

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[0 : 00] Well, please turn with me now to Acts 24, and we'll read again from verse 14. But this I confess to you, that according to the way which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the just and the just.

So I always take pains to have a clear conscience towards both God and man. One of the wonderful things about the Bible is that because it is indeed reliable in all that it says, reliable in its account of events such as this, as you read a passage like this, you're really being transported effectively back to that occasion.

And today we're just standing, as it were, in this courtroom, listening to these proceedings. Paul making his defense, Tertullus, this professional lawyer type of figure, laying out the charges against him.

The charges were threefold, that Paul was a troublemaker, that he was a ringleader of this sect, that he was a profaner of the temple. Tertullus was hired particularly for this purpose.

This would be his occupation. He was a kind of lawyer, a professional man, somebody who was skilled in presenting the likes of these charges against Paul in a courtroom setting.

[1 : 42] And then Paul was given, as we've read, the opportunity of defending himself. He had the charges that all laid out.

Tertullus has spoken. And now the governor nods to Paul, gives him the signal. Now it's up to you. And so Paul makes his confession.

But he doesn't confess any guilt to the charges that are laid against him. He makes a confession of his faith. He makes a confession that really has four very important elements to it, and they're all joined together.

A confession in which he comes, not to express any guilt at all, but to just set out his way of life. It's a very personal confession.

It's a very personal presentation of his case. The word I appears in it four times, but not in any way that's presumptuous or proud of himself.

[2 : 47] And the four things he confesses that form what you might call the basis of this definition of a Christian life, are themselves today important for you and for me and for all of us together.

First of all, he's saying, I confess, I worship. I worship this God. I worship the God of our fathers according to the way which they call a sect.

That's the first confession. First part of the confession, I worship. The second one is, I believe. In fact, we'll see that the two are connected significantly.

I worship believing. He says, I believe everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets. Thirdly, I have a hope in God.

I'm a hoper. I hope in God. And I hope in relation to the resurrection of the dead. That's where my hope reaches forward to.

[3 : 57] And fourthly, I take pains. We'll see that that means I strive. I take pains. I strive always to have a clear conscience towards both God and man.

Four elements all closely tied together, all forming a definition of a Christian life or a Christian way of life. I worship.

Now, he says, according to the way. I confess to you that according to the way which they call a sect, I worship. The way, as you find it here in the ESVs, is good because in this sense, at least, it gives you this word, the way, with a capital W.

Because that's what those who are observing the church of these early times, they called them the people of the way. The way of following their leader.

The way of faith. The way of faith in Christ. The way of believing all of those things that Paul was going to mention that he believed in. In other words, Paul is saying, I have a certain path to my life. [5 : 09] I have a certain way by which I follow my leader, my savior. I worship according to the way. I worship according to what's specified of that way of life, of that way of pleasing God, which he himself has specified in his word.

And that means that for Paul, life is not just about a loose collection of principles or things which you might regard as important points.

For Paul, the way means an affirmation of absolutes. And for Paul, truth is not about something that's true today and then not tomorrow.

Truth is not something that may be suitable for today, but then you have to leave it and take up something else tomorrow. No, as the world advances, as technology advances, as human thinking advances.

No, for Paul, the worship is a worship according to the way. According to what God himself has specified and laid down and what his forefathers as Christians, as believers, have followed before him.

[6 : 14] This, he says, is my confession to you. This is what I'm happy to confess. That I, according to the way which they call a sect, I worship God.

That's why we're here today. Because we're following in the line of the apostle and those who are before him, all the way through the pages of history.

People who've worshipped the way, the way that God himself has specified. People who have worshipped knowing that God is true to himself and what he says in the Bible regarding himself and his worthiness to be worshipped.

And the benefits we have of worshipping him. Now, we're not going to go into any aspects of worship and what it entails as such. But, just again to emphasize that our presence here is an important aspect of worship.

Because we worship physically as well as spiritually. We come together physically. We come together in such a way that really appreciates the gathering together that God enables us by his providence to engage in.

[7 : 25] Yes, we have live stream. We're very thankful to God for live stream. It's a brilliant provision for those who simply cannot gather with others as we gather here today.

But remember, your physical presence is an aspect of your worship. When you cannot be present physically, it doesn't mean you're not able to worship.

But when you are able to come physically together, you are expressing through your very body your appreciation of being together with other people as joined in worship of God.

This, he says, I confess to you that according to the way I worship. And, of course, the worship is a fundamental mark of being a Christian, of being Christians, as we say, together.

A life of praise, of adoration, of prayer, of listening to God. Of coming to appreciate the revelation that God has given us. Of coming to know more of his will for us.

[8 : 31] Of coming to actually appreciate the fact that God has remembered us, to give us the Bible. We worship him according to the way. I worship the God, he says, of our fathers.

And that worship dominates the whole of a Christian life. There's a wonderful verse in Judges chapter 7, verse 15, which makes a very important emphasis for us.

Remember the story of Gideon. And how Gideon had got down to the camp of the Midianites, their enemies at the time. And he was listening to the interpretation of a dream that one of the Midianites had.

And as soon as the dream was about how the people of Israel under Gideon would actually prevail over the Midianites. As soon as Gideon heard the interpretation, he worshipped.

He didn't just say, great, let's go to it. He stopped, first of all, to worship. As soon as he heard, he worshipped. In other words, for us, that's a reminder that worship is appropriate at all times.

[9 : 42] That worship is something that we engage in, even in the spur of a moment, when the situation calls for it. As soon as he heard, he worshipped.

Is that my first thought? When something clicks in my life, in the providence of God, whether it's difficult or whether it's joyous, is that my first reaction?

Is that my first thought? I have to worship God. I remember when some Koreans were visiting the island, and were living with us, partly living with us, but especially came to visit us, just as they arrived, having picked them up, taking them back to the mansus was when we were in Garibust. And there were four of them, I remember rightly. And I took them into the sitting room. I turned my back round, and then I started saying how great it was to have them at last here.

And I turned round, and they weren't listening because they were worshipping. They were giving thanks to God that they had arrived there, that they had come safely to their destination.

[10:53] Is our first thought, when we're going on holiday, having asked for God's blessing to accompany us, is our first thought when we get there to worship God, or do we just dive into the swimming pool or whatever?

As soon as Gideon heard, he worshipped. And here is Paul saying, this is my confession to you, that according to the way, I worship the God of our fathers.

That's the other thing he mentions. I worship the God of our fathers. He's not worshipping a new God. He's not worshipping in a new church. God has only ever had the one church, all the way through the history of the Old Testament into the New Testament, right up to the present day in Stornoway Free Church.

You belong to the church of the Apostle Paul. The church that worships the God of our fathers. What does he mean, the God of our fathers? The God of promises. The God of truth.

The God of revelation. That's who we worship today. And Paul would have recognized our worship as a worship of the God he worshiped, the same true and living God.

[12:04] Now different, that is too, to many of the ideas that you find currently in people's minds, in the church in the wider sense, where you have to adjust the Bible according to what you think is the needs of the age.

Whether it's to do with worship or what you believe, as we'll see in a minute. He says, I worship. I worship according to the way, according to God's revelation. I worship the God of our fathers.

In other words, he's saying, the God Abraham worshiped, the God Noah worshiped, the God Abel worshiped, the God Noah worshiped. That's the God I worship. The God of covenant promises. And they stretched down through the years right to the present day. And it will go on like that till the end of the world. The God of our fathers.

You today as a congregation have a very rich heritage. Not because you're a free church congregation as such, though that itself is precious.

[13:13] But because you worship the God of our fathers. You have learned the importance of covenant theology. The importance of promises given to God, by God to his children and their children after them.

I worship the God of our fathers. So that's the first thing I worship. But certainly, I believe. I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets. In other words, the Old Testament scriptures as Paul had them, that was the writings of the time. Afterwards, through his own writings and other apostles, they came to be added to so that you have a complete Bible now in your possession as the word of God written.

But he's saying, I believe everything laid down in the law and the prophets. But you notice how it's believing rather than just saying, I believe. I worship believing.

Now that's important, isn't it? I worship believing. My worship today and you worship today or worship together is not just a man-made ritual. That's not something that's been invented by the church.

[14:26] That's not something that's come to us without having a proper foundation in God himself. I worship believing. In other words, your worship today is a believing worship.

It's a worship in which your mind is active. In which your whole soul is engaged. A worship in which your emotions should be stirred. A worship in which your conscience is engaged.

A worship in which your will is engaged. As to the serving of God. As to what you should be in this world and I should be as people in this life.

I worship believing. Your love for God is not a thoughtless love.

It's not a love just based on something you've read. It's not a love based on something someone's told you. It's not a love just copying somebody else who confesses to love the Lord.

[15:31] It is a thinking love. It's a love in which your thoughts are engaged when you're saying I love the Lord. Why? Because He has saved me.

Because He's worthy of my worship. Because He's God. I worship believing. What did he say? Believing everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets.

See, Paul is not saying I worship believing the things that seem appropriate to me. I worship believing things that I would have put in my own terms other than what my fathers in the Old Testament.

I worship, He says, believing everything in the law and written in the prophets. Paul is not a cut and paste Christian. Paul doesn't come to his Bible as he had it in those days and say, now which parts of that are no longer relevant for the age that I'm living in?

Whether it's to do with human relationships or his relationship to God or the world in which he lives or the church or what the church is about, none of that as far as the apostle is concerned is of human invention when he comes to read the scriptures and therefore I believe he says, everything. [16:56] You know, the saddest thing or one of the saddest thing today is, again speaking of the widest church in the wider sense, and this is not drawing any attention to ourselves as denomination so that we can take pride in what we are, but looking at the church in the wider sense, when church leaders deny fundamental truths of the gospel, it's one of the great tragedies of our age.

When you find church leaders saying, actually, Jesus didn't rise physically from the dead, that's just a way in which the memory of his teaching was kept by the apostles and handed on to their successors.

Actually, Paul wouldn't have written about human relationships, men and women's relationships, if he was living today, he wouldn't have put it in the terms in which he put it in 1 Corinthians or wherever.

Paul is not ultimately the author of his own letters, not as Peter, not as John, not as Luke can write in the book of Acts, it's the Holy Spirit who led these people, as the Bible itself says, who led these men in order to bring to us the message of the gospel and God bringing it about to be written for our benefit.

And because it's God's word, it doesn't lie. And in the strictest sense, the Bible doesn't need to be made relevant.

[18:30] Some people will tell you, make the preaching of the gospel relevant, and yes, I see the point in that. But then say, make the Bible relevant to the age in which you're preaching.

I don't need to make the Bible relevant. It's not my job. The Bible is already relevant because God has taken account of every single generation of human history right down to the end of the world, and he said, this word is relevant to your needs.

That's what it means. This word doesn't need to be made relevant by me or anybody else. I seek to bring out its relevance to myself and to others.

The already existing relevance of the Bible to your circumstances today and my circumstances, to your needs as a congregation, the relevance is there. We need to seek to bring it out and understand it more fully.

Everything written, everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets. So the greatest temptation, I think it's right to say, of the church today is a temptation to see flaws in the Bible.

[19:43] Flaws in what the Bible tells you about the history of the Old Testament or New Testament. And the greatest temptation to you as a Christian and to me, because of the importance of the Word of God and knowing what this Bible actually is.

And of course, you always ask, not what does the Bible say as your first question, but what is the Bible? What is this book? Before you ask, what does it say to me?

You're saying, who is its author? Who's written it? And because it's God's Word, then you ask, well, what is it saying to me? What is God saying to me? The greatest temptation to you and to me as Christians today is the very temptation with which the devil came to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

What is it? Has God really said? Has God really said that?

Placing doubt in your mind in regard to the reliability or the veracity of God and trying to deflect you from the fact that you are dealing with God's truth when you're dealing with the Scriptures.

[21:00] I worship believingly. I worship believing all the things that are written in the prophets and laid down by the law. Thirdly, I worship having a hope.

Having this hope in God which these men themselves, that's his opponents, accept that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust, that's what his hope involves or entails. It's a hope connected to the resurrection, a resurrection from the dead. Now, we haven't got time to go into that itself as a topic, but you remember how he described the Ephesians in Ephesians chapter 2 when Paul wrote to them and how he described how they once were before they came to know Christ.

You where he says, without God and without hope in the world. Without God and without hope. You don't have God, you don't have hope.

The world speaks about hope. We might ourselves speak about hope and there is a hope of a kind that is really no more than wishful thinking. You hope something will work out, but you can't guarantee that it will work out the way you hope if you use hope in that sense.

[22 : 20] Those of you at heart supporters are hoping they might win the league. No guarantee of it. Might yet be overtaken. But that hope, that kind of hope exists with that and many other topics as well you can think of.

The Christian hope is not a hoping for the best, wondering if it's ever going to come about. The Christian hope is that positive hope, that hope that will never be put to shame, that will never be denied.

The hope that is connected to the resurrection of Christ and therefore to the resurrection of his people joined to him. Having this hope in God that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.

You see, our hope has to be based on something absolutely solid. A foundation that's not going to change, not going to move as the events of history or the providence of your life moves.

Your hope has to be something connected firmly to an unchanging, unchangeable foundation. And the Christian hope is that.

[23 : 32] Because it's connected with, it's based upon the reality of Christ. the reality of his death, the reality of his resurrection particularly. And through faith in him, you believe the Bible when it tells you, because of your connection believingly to him, everything that God assures you will take place yet is in fact established already.

There will be a resurrection, Paul says, of the just and the unjust. And all the way through Paul's writings and did through the whole New Testament, you find that as very central to the preaching of the apostles.

The doctrine of the resurrection. Now we make a lot of the doctrine of the death of Christ. Of course we do. Our salvation is based upon that.

But not without the resurrection equally so. if Jesus, as Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 15, I remember going through this with you during the final part of my time here with you, went through 1 Corinthians 15, that wonderful detailed exposition of the doctrine of the resurrection.

Remember how Paul put it there. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. You discount the whole idea of resurrection, therefore Christ is still dead.

[25 : 06] And if Christ is not risen, we have no hope. If Christ is not risen, we are still, he says, in our sins. Just awaiting the judgment of God.

But he says, now that Christ is risen from the dead, you have a hope of eternal life. A positive affirmation and hope that that will be your portion in eternity.

Is that your hope today? Don't tell me you're here just hoping for the best that somehow things will work out all right. That somehow at the end of your life and as you come from this life into eternity, somehow, maybe you don't know how, but somehow things will work out positively for you.

that's not hope. That's not hope. That's just wishing for the best and not sure if it will happen.

That's just taking your chances, as the world would put it. That's not the hope of the gospel. Your hope is through faith in Christ, based upon him, based on his resurrection and looking forward to being raised with him from the dead.

[26 : 33] Isn't that your hope? Isn't that at the center of your Christian life and thinking today? What Paul is saying, this is, I worship God, I worship believingly, having this hope in God, so I always take pains.

The fourth thing, I always take pains to have a clear conscience towards both God and man. man. In other words, in his definition of a Christian life, Paul doesn't leave out his conscience.

Paul doesn't say, well, I just go about doing my best, but I'm not too concerned about it. I'm not too concerned about what my conscience is saying.
I'm not too concerned about distinguishing right from wrong or being too strict about those things.
No, the language Paul is using here actually, it's interesting, I always take pains.
It's a word connected with the strivings of an athlete, either in training or in the actual race or activity that the athlete is involved with. And Paul frequently actually took some illustrations from the world of athletics.

[27 : 44] And he's using this word of athletes in their training or in their exercise or running as an athlete. This he says is, what I'm like spiritually, as surely as an athlete takes pains, strenuously strives on day by day to improve on their performance.

That's how I am as a Christian. I take pains with what? With my conscience. And it's not enough for Paul to say, I take pains in regard to my conscience between myself and God.

That is ultimately the case for him. But he's saying I take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. He's not leaving out his relationships with his fellow human beings.

It's not enough for him to say, I'm persuaded my conscience is clean between myself and God irrespective of how I live in relation to other people. He said I need a clear conscience in all my relationships with my fellow human beings.

I need to make sure that my conscience is clean. I need to attend to the things that I know are still wrong in my life. I need to attend to how I speak to people.

[29 : 06] I need to attend to how I react to people, how I respond to people because I need to keep a clear conscience between God, between myself and God and myself and man.

And we need to keep both of these in place. Clear conscience. I worship.

I worship believingly. I have a hope connected to resurrection. I take pains.

I strive. I strive to have a clear conscience towards both God and man. Now every one of us, myself included, comes very far short in each and all of these four concepts.

Our worship is never what it should be. It's never as pure as it should be, personally, individually, even collectively. our believing is never without some doubt or other creeping in, not into the believing itself, but to accompany my believing.

[30 : 24] And sometimes we have to come and ask God's forgiveness for our slowness to believe what he says in his word. And I have a hope.

It's not a hope that's undisturbed some of the time. So I have questions and doubts creeping in. And I keep a clear conscience.

I strive. But every day I need to come to God and say, Lord, forgive me. I have not striven the way I should to keep my conscience clean today.

But you know what? Your worship, your believing, your hope, you're taking pains. All the things that you confess are still wrong are all to be brought under the provision of Jesus Christ.

Because God will accept you with all your faults and mine when Christ is your covering, when Christ is your Savior, when God sees you through Christ himself, related to him, him, so you stand before him, judicially as if you've never sinned, and actually in a way that still goes on being sanctified, till you come to be glorified.

[31 : 56] Worship, believing, having a hope, and taking pains with your conscience. May God bless these thoughts on his word to us today.

We're going to sing in conclusion now from Psalm 62, Psalm number 62 in the Scottish Psalter, to the tune Amazing Grace, verses 5 to 8.

Psalm 62 verses 5 to 8 of Psalm 62, my soul wait thou with patience.

my soul wait thou with patience upon thy God alone On Him dependeth all my hope and expectation.

He only my salvation is, and my strong rock is He.

[33 : 45] He only is my sure defense, I shall not live at He.

In God my glory place it is, and my salvation sure.

In God the rock is of my strength, my refuge most secure.

Ye people, place your confidence in Him continually.

Before Him pour, be out your heart.

[35 : 09] God is our refuge high. Please allow me to get to the main door after the benediction.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore. Amen. Amen.
Thank you.
Thank you.