

THE ALEPH COURSE : Notes for talking.

0 : WHAT IT'S ABOUT.

INTRODUCTION, GREETING.

Hello, welcome, I'm me. I'm going to tell you what all this is about.

I hope you enjoyed your dinner. That's a gift – absolutely no obligation, no fine print, and we really mean it. It's bait (of course), but if you want to leave now you're free to do so.

But we hope you'll stay a little longer, because we do want to tell you about a number of further evenings that we plan to present.

And there is still no obligation, etc. (Emphasise because people are very suspicious of free lunches.). If you want to walk away at the end of the evening and never see us again, we'll be sorry, but we won't pester, we won't call, we won't send you publicity about exciting events in the future. We do have a mailing list, but if you don't want to be on it we take you off.

(And if you change your mind, we're very happy to put you back on.)

SO WHAT ABOUT THE FURTHER EVENINGS ?

This is where the story really starts, and I have to begin with a little bit more about me. You might well have heard it or read it, or something very similar. elsewhere – if so, please bear with me for a minute or two.

I am a Christian.

Pause. Not a good start, many people might think.

I think it's an excellent start, and that's what I'm going to talk about, but before going on I want to make two points.

- I am not trying to convert you. (If you decide you want to be converted, I'll be happy, but that isn't the object of the exercise.) I hope to offer you some food for thought, and a different view of Christianity. I hope you'll find it worth thinking about. Obviously, if your thinking leads you to inquire further I'll approve, but that's up to you. (And, he added subliminally, to God, but we'll come to that later.)
- If you are already committed to another religion, I'm not trying to convert you either. (I'll have a little more to say about that later.) I hope you'll stay; I hope you might find something in what we say that will help you in your spiritual life. Perhaps you'll have something to offer that might help us to see things more clearly.

Right. Back to the start.

I am a Christian.

That is so important to me, and has made my life so immeasurably better than I could have hoped, that I want to tell you something about it –

- because I think Christianity could do for you what it has for me.

So you've heard it before. Perhaps you've even enquired further.

And perhaps you've found it lacking. You've decided that Christianity is incredible, or baseless, or pointless, or irrational, or unprovable, or

Exactly that happened to a student I knew some years ago. This story is from memory, and not reliable as to details, but the main idea is true. He'd been approached by an ardent young Christian (female) student, and told that he was in danger unless he became a Christian. At least one of those adjectives had caught his attention, and he had been interested enough to ask more questions. Eventually, though, he had to say that he couldn't believe something or other; he was

told that he should have faith. He said he couldn't have faith in that; he was told to pray about it. And, as he told the story, he tried, and nothing happened. He didn't see much point in going on.

Let's sum up those, and more, by saying that you've decided that Christianity is foolishness. I choose the word with intent, for it makes the point that you are not alone – over 1900 years ago, St Paul (a very significant early Christian) wrote that his preaching was "to the Greeks foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1.23), and people have been finding Christianity to be foolishness ever since.

Fair enough, perhaps. But that something should be considered foolish doesn't automatically make it wrong. Two examples (scientific in nature, which shows my background – perhaps you have other examples from your own areas of interest) :

- As an undergraduate, I studied geology for two years. Just once, towards the end of the two years, a lecture mentioned a curious idea held by a few odd people : that all the continents had once been a single mass. He observed that if you looked at a globe and compared the land masses opposing each other across oceans, they often did look as though they might fit together not too badly – but there was no real evidence, and he didn't think it likely. There were odd coincidences everywhere, and the idea was too far-fetched to be considered seriously.

Now continental drift is accepted as orthodox doctrine. That's why New Zealand is here.

- My main subject was chemistry. If anyone had suggested then that within a few years the whole developed world would become totally reliant for its operation on crystals of silicon that, by the current analytical techniques, were absolutely pure, they would have been regarded as worse than foolish.

But now we're so tied up with computers that it is at least thinkable that our systems can be devastated by a trivial programming problem.

So in some cases FOOLISHNESS simply means "WE DON'T KNOW ENOUGH YET".

And, of course, there's another meaning, which is something like SILLINESS or IRRATIONALITY or NONSENSE. That's probably what St Paul meant. That's alive and well too, and St Paul's words have been used to excuse all sorts of sloppy thinking, and to justify unreasonable positions against reasoned argument. I don't think that's what St Paul meant.

This can be taken to extremes, when it leads to an eager acceptance of internal contradiction and unresolved paradox, "justified" by an association of ideas something like :

This assertion appears to be impossible, or meaningless;
So it must be incomprehensible to the human mind;
And only comprehensible to God;
Which demonstrates that God is greater than we are.

If people ask you to believe that sort of "argument", and they do, then I think you are right to be sceptical about it, and about its source. I think it happens because many of us – perhaps all of us – do cherish yearnings for marvels and wonders and magic and a Superman-like God who will not only leap tall buildings at a single bound, but also put everything right with His X-ray vision and death rays.

But I don't think that Christianity is quite like that, and I'm sorry that people are put off by Christians who insist that they must believe that it is.

I must add that I'm sure that there really are wonders and marvels, but they're not that sort of thing. They're far, far better.

And THAT's the view I want to put forward in the next few weeks.

THE VIEW AHEAD.

I want to URGE YOU TO REVISIT YOUR IDEAS, and ask whether they might be related to the "don't know enough yet" sort of foolishness.

To do so, I'll offer you an approach to Christianity which isn't the conventional view – though it's still Christianity.

I think it makes a lot of sense. I think it's important (perhaps you disagree), but I also think it's intrinsically interesting.

Why not give it a fair hearing ?

There are ten talks after this, falling into four classes :

There are THREE TALKS on why anyone might want to bother with Christianity :

VALUES.
GOD ?
CHRISTIANITY ?

There are THREE TALKS on something like "Christianity now", intended to introduce a "modern" context for the subject :

EVIDENCE.
SOURCES.
THE CHURCH.

There are THREE TALKS on some aspects of Christian belief which seem to me to be important :

JESUS.
DOCTRINE.
GOD ACTS.

There is ONE TALK which is a sort of summary :

IMPLICATIONS.

Every week we'll have a dinner (perhaps not quite as sumptuous as this one, but enough to keep you going until morning), then a talk from me, then an opportunity to discuss it, ask questions, fight back, disagree if you want to, generally put your point of view.

CAVEAT.

There's one more VERY IMPORTANT point which I want to emphasise.

That list is strongly based on the way I see things. I can't help that – I'm giving the talks, and my view is all I have to go on.

But MY VIEW IS NOT IMPORTANT; I am absolutely not telling you that this is the way you should be thinking.

<p>DO NOT BELIEVE WHAT I SAY (unless, and until, you've worked it out for yourself.)</p>
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What I'm really trying to tell you about isn't where I've got to in my Christian life; I think that the two important messages in this series are

HOW I GOT THERE, which might give you some ideas; and

YOU DON'T HAVE TO SWALLOW IT ALL AT ONCE – but you do have to keep going.

Your answers might be different, but the answers are there if you want to look for them. And we've known that for a long time too :

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you ..."
(Matthew 7.7)

FINALLY –

And there is still absolutely no obligation; you can come and go as you wish, though it probably makes more sense if you keep in touch with the development, and if you choose to stop no one will bother you. (We'd like to know why, if you'd care to tell us, because we're interested.)

Think about it.