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**The Founder of Christianity**  
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Charles Harold Dodd, or C.H. Dodd, was a biblical scholar and the author of the book *The Founder of Christianity*. He was born in 1884 in Wales and grew to become a lecturer, professor, and prolific writer whose books highlight “his search for unity in the teaching of the New Testament writings.”<sup>1</sup> He was the General Director of “the project which produced the modern translation of the...*The New English Bible*”<sup>2</sup> which was completed in 1970, three years before his death. From the Preface of *The Founder of Christianity* we learn that the central content of the book came from several lectures Dodd gave at the University of College of Wales in February 1954. With permission, he revised these lectures and elaborated in various areas in order to complete the work before us and have it published by 1970. As the book’s title suggests, Dodd’s primary subject is the founder of Christianity himself, and thus he invites his reader on a journey to the historical period that served as the stage for the inception of this faith: “At the time of our story the prefect of Judaea was Pontius Pilate, whose term of office was from A.D. 26 to 37”<sup>3</sup> and “the High Priest was Joseph Caiaphas.”<sup>4</sup>

In chapter one Dodd starts with the reality of the existence of the Christian church describing it as “a contemporary society whose dependence on its Founder is a permanent feature of its continuing existence,”<sup>5</sup> and traces its existence back in time to its origin while briefly noting the impact of its presence along the way until he arrives to the beginnings of the first century. Paralleling this journey through time, he then considers some of the current practices of the church in the twentieth century and centers on two particularities of the church that have been a constant since its inception: firstly, that “preoccupation with ancient history is a characteristic...of Christian worship”<sup>6</sup> and secondly, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. We find that these two elements serve as threads that run through the whole of the text. Upon reflecting on the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, Dodd makes a profound observation: “in this

central act of Christian worship—in this act, therefore, which more than any other expresses all that Christianity is—there is included an act of remembrance”<sup>7</sup> and “it is of some importance that the church remembers an event which is actual, concrete, and in principle dateable like any other historical event.”<sup>8</sup> Herein we find Dodd’s premise that the Christian church is not founded on traditions that were the product of the efforts of men to establish a religious institution, but rather that its very inception hinges on actual events that have been recalled throughout history. This has contributed to the fact that, in reference to the Lord’s Supper, “For nineteen centuries there has not been one single week in which this act of remembrance was not made, one generation reminding another.”<sup>9</sup>

The second chapter centers on the gospel records. Dodd believes that the first of the gospels written was Mark and that Luke and Matthew used this record as a source. Dodd goes on to consider how the teachings of Jesus and how the narrative in the gospels were likely compiled. He says that “it was mainly through the living voice that the sayings of Jesus were first handed down”<sup>10</sup> where the living voice refers to “preaching, teaching and worship.”<sup>11</sup> Dodd reminds us that while Jesus spoke in Aramaic “we have his sayings in Greek translation, made, presumably, by bilingual Christians who did their best to give the sense.”<sup>12</sup> This provides a logical explanation for the slight variations that are sometimes found in some of the dialogue or the sayings of Jesus in Scripture since we have different writers translating from one language to another and using the words they understand will most accurately convey the original meaning. I was surprised, however that Dodd mentioned that “it is improbable that the apostle”<sup>13</sup> Matthew authored the gospel attributed to him “though he may well have sponsored some of the material it embodies,”<sup>14</sup> and that of the gospel of John he says, “there are serious difficulties in the way of accepting his authorship.”<sup>15</sup> He doesn’t provide any specific reasons for why he doubts the

authorship of these records, but nonetheless he doesn't deem them any less credible. Dodd shares that Mark, as the first gospel, is "dated between A.D. 65 and 70...when many who remembered the events must still have been alive"<sup>16</sup> and goes on to provide details of the time in history and of the political climate that witnessed the composition of this record:

Mark is preaching the gospel; he is doing it by telling a story belonging to the world of actual fact: the world in which Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate played the parts on the public stage which secular historians ascribe to them; the world in which the machinery of Roman rule operated in ways known to all students of the period; the world which was disturbed by the familiar tensions and conflicts of the last half century of the Jewish state.<sup>17</sup>

Yet it is important to note, as Dodd does, that "All four gospels have the character of fact *plus* interpretation"<sup>18</sup> which could be conflicting to some, but Dodd goes on to argue that "To the serious historian...the interest and meaning which an event bore for those who felt its impact is a part of the event."<sup>19</sup> He goes on to emphasize that "the belief that Jesus, having been put to death by crucifixion, 'rose from the dead'...is not a belief that grew up within the church, or a doctrine whose development might be traced"<sup>20</sup> and that in fact, without this belief, "there would have been no church and no gospels."<sup>21</sup> Dodd does not shy away from some of the points that critics have used to discredit the historicity of the gospels and instead he reasons that "where [human] experience runs into mystery...such a story...required the aid of symbolism and imagery"<sup>22</sup> since "the facts are being viewed in depth, not superficially."<sup>23</sup> Dodd goes on to argue that the mere mention of miracles in the gospel accounts should not discredit them when the faith that early Christians had of these occurrences "acted as a preservative of genuinely historical memories."<sup>24</sup> It is safe to conclude from his assessment that, though the four gospels may vary in some details, they consistently point to a real person in history who was experienced and whose life took place among us.

The third chapter of *The Founder of Christianity* begins to more directly engage with the Founder himself, and particularly considers some of Jesus' personal traits, often evident in his style of teaching. Dodd writes of how Jesus was inclined to paint pictures with his words and used short stories commonly known as parables.<sup>25</sup> By use of these stories, Jesus tended to "leave people to think out implications for themselves"<sup>26</sup> while conveying that not only was their need to make a decision urgent,<sup>27</sup> but that their response also came with eternal consequence. While Jesus spoke and conducted himself with authority, his authority was not forceful but rather "respected the freedom of a person."<sup>28</sup> Returning to the parables, Dodd explains that some were rooted in realism while others were filled with "'apocalyptic' imagery,"<sup>29</sup> typically borrowed from the Old Testament. Using the example from Luke 10:18 where Jesus speaks of having seen Satan fall from the sky, Dodd mentions that "there is no reason to assume that [Jesus] intended to describe supernatural phenomena which might, in any literal sense, be "seen."<sup>30</sup> I would ask why? While I understand that symbolism permeated much of Jewish teaching, I have no doubt that some of the apocalyptic images used in Jesus' teaching could also be literal occurrences in the invisible, spiritual realm. Dodd goes on to note that Jesus' teaching style provides insight into his personality: "The Author of the parables must have been genuinely interested in people; he must have enjoyed mixing with various types"<sup>31</sup> and the gospels agree as they point out Jesus' "association with people who were neither socially accepted nor morally approved."<sup>32</sup> In their accounts, the gospel writers demonstrate how those whom Jesus touched were moved towards "faith... in the goodness of God"<sup>33</sup> and "effective redirection."<sup>34</sup>

The fourth chapter of Dodd's books hones in on Jesus as a Teacher. Dodd explains that although Jesus also interpreted the Law of Moses as was common among rabbis, it was surprising to hear a rabbi critique it as Jesus did at times.<sup>35</sup> Another aspect that was distinct in

Jesus' teaching (and that was briefly referenced above) is that many of his parables "have a common theme...the arrival of 'zero hour,' the climax of a process, bringing a crisis in which decisive action is called for."<sup>36</sup> Dodd mentions that in Mark's account it's not uncommon to come across the statement "The time has come; the kingdom of God is upon you!"<sup>37</sup> which carries a sense of urgency and which Dodd interprets as: "Here is God in all his power and majesty, confronting you where you live! What are you going to do about it?"<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, as Dodd references Luke 11:20, which also speaks of the coming of God's kingdom and Jesus' power to drive out demons, Dodd writes that there may or may not be evil spirits<sup>39</sup> and leaves one to wonder what his personal position might be on the matter. I assume he reserves his thoughts to speak strictly as a historian and to not allow bias to distract the reader from what is clear and undeniable, whether one believes in spirits or not: "in the presence of Jesus the dark forces within, which ravage the souls and bodies of men, were overcome and their victims made new."<sup>40</sup> As a teacher, "in his actions as well as in his words,"<sup>41</sup> Jesus breathed new life into Old Testament pictures of God as our Shepherd by his care for others. He was also always calling his hearers to repent<sup>42</sup> and to be like their Father in Heaven.<sup>43</sup> At times, Jesus' teaching was in opposition to that of other rabbis<sup>44</sup> because he taught that every action needed to be "the sincere expression of an inward disposition"<sup>45</sup> rather than a religious display of self-righteousness which was common among the religious teachers, and this "arose out of the conviction that with the coming of the kingdom of God a new era in relations between God and man had set in."<sup>46</sup>

Moving from Jesus' teaching, Dodd now moves to the themes and subjects of "The People of God" and "Messiah" in chapters five and six of his book. While Jesus called people to repentance through his teaching, "His aim was to constitute a community worthy of the name of a people of God...through individual response to God coming in his kingdom."<sup>47</sup> What was being

announced through this call was also the notion that “the present Jewish establishment is doomed; the true people of God will emerge from its ruins”<sup>48</sup> but not through reform, but “by a creative act of God.”<sup>49</sup> And this was not so much “a matter of replacement but of resurrection.”<sup>50</sup> Jesus sent out his disciples to proclaim this same message and to serve as “recruiting agents for the new people of God,”<sup>51</sup> but more than this, “they were to be its foundation members,”<sup>52</sup> centered on the person of Jesus and open to all who would heed his call.<sup>53</sup> Jesus’ sayings included specific instructions for those who would be part of this newly formed community<sup>54</sup> that called them to willingly serve others<sup>55</sup> just as “The new Israel has a ‘Messiah’ who is the servant of all.”<sup>56</sup> In fact, Dodd explains, “the whole conception of a new people of God is based upon the principle of ‘dying to live,’”<sup>57</sup> and just as “the status of Israel as the people of God was founded upon a ‘covenant,’”<sup>58</sup> when Jesus “invited his followers to drink of the cup of the covenant: he was formally installing them as foundation members of the new people of God.”<sup>59</sup> Yet these same members deserted Jesus upon his arrest immediately following that covenantal act. If this would have been the whole story, there would be no church today, and yet Dodd tells us the church emerged. How? Because Jesus “returned to them, alive after death, and that this return was an act of forgiveness which reinstated them.”<sup>60</sup>

As alluded to, Jesus intended to be a Messiah who served and who would suffer;<sup>61</sup> this was very different from the expected “‘messiahship’[that] was associated with the political and military role of the ‘Son of David.’”<sup>62</sup> Instead, Jesus’ mission and destiny would be in line with The Servant of the Lord described in Isaiah.<sup>63</sup> By the use of the words “blood of the covenant” during the Lord’s Supper, Dodd expresses that “Jesus was saying that in order that the ‘covenant’ might become effective...that the new people of God might come into existence, [Jesus] was voluntarily taking a course which would lead to his death.”<sup>64</sup> I did notice that while Dodd

describes the baptism of Jesus in relation to the words in Isaiah as symbolic to his mission,<sup>65</sup> though this offers insight, Dodd doesn't seem to establish the factualness of the supernatural details of the event. I was also surprised to read from Dodd that "there is no sufficient evidence that in Jewish circles of the time of Jesus 'Son of Man' was current as a title equivalent, or alternative, to 'Messiah,'"<sup>66</sup> and yet Dodd recognizes that it is "striking that so many of the 'Son of Man' sayings are associated with functions of the Servant."<sup>67</sup> I confess that I struggle with Dodd when he describes Jesus' statements about the coming of the Son of Man as "imaginative symbolism,"<sup>68</sup> and wonder why he hesitates to also consider those words a literal possibility.

In the seventh and eighth chapters of his book, Dodd considers some aspects of Jesus's experiences first in Galilee, and later, towards the end of his public ministry, in Jerusalem. Jesus grew up in Galilee and was a craftsman from Nazareth and also a literate Jewish man.<sup>69</sup> At his baptism by John, "he was 'anointed' for his mission"<sup>70</sup> and went out into the wilderness where in his defeat of the temptations presented to him by the Satan, not only does he overcome as the representative of Israel where Israel had once failed,<sup>71</sup> but also defeats privately the temptations he was surely to face publicly in his ministry.<sup>72</sup> When John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus understood that his time of official public ministry had begun<sup>73</sup> and in his ministry in Galilee, Dodd outlines "three main types of activity:"<sup>74</sup> Preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God so that his hearers would respond to the invitation of becoming the people of God, ministering to meet physical, emotional and spiritual needs and thus "leading people...into a new life under the inspiration of a personal attachment to himself,"<sup>75</sup> and lastly was controversy<sup>76</sup> as the religious leaders reacted to his ministry. Some of this arose from his relations with those considered unacceptable to the Jewish establishment, the way his healings provoked distrust, and also from his eventual "breach"<sup>77</sup> with his biological family relations who represented, by extension, an

eventual breach with the nation of Israel as a new people was emerging.<sup>78</sup> Though there were men of Galilee who became his disciples, overall the towns of Galilee did not respond with faith or repentance.<sup>79</sup> Jesus' time in Galilee culminated in feeding the multitude. Dodd treats this as a singular event and mentions that Mark and Matthew "give duplicate accounts."<sup>80</sup> I find this odd when in the dialogue recorded in the eighth chapter of the gospel of Mark Jesus clearly references two separate feeding events when warning to the disciples about the yeast of the Pharisees.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, Dodd suggests that this was Jesus' final attempt to try "to get [the people] to see what he stood for."<sup>82</sup> Rather than perceived as a miracle,<sup>83</sup> the feeding is more so a "sign"<sup>84</sup> that foreshadows the language of the last supper<sup>85</sup> with the breaking of the bread while also tangibly showing Jesus as the provider and host<sup>86</sup> of the blessings of God through this act of community.<sup>87</sup> Still, in their desire to make Jesus their militant leader by force, the people had not shed their old expectations of Messiah and completely missed Jesus' mission. Dodd tells us that "If the mission of Jesus had as its aim the integration of a new Israel as the true people of God, then sooner or later his message must be presented, and presented in a way that challenged a decisive response one way or the other, at Jerusalem, the central hearth and shrine of historic Israel."<sup>88</sup> Once we've entered Jerusalem in the reading, Dodd guides us through the events that took place from Jesus' entry into the city up through his death. Upon his entry, Dodd reminds us of Jesus' actions in the temple area where he confronts how "the priesthood was exploiting the sanctity of the temple to make it the stronghold of a powerful and exclusive faction,"<sup>89</sup> drives out the traders, and cleanses the temple "*for the Gentiles*,"<sup>90</sup> while alluding to a future cleansed temple that is "not made with hands" and that was coming into being.<sup>91</sup> With this provocation, it was clear to the religious leadership that Jesus not only had to die but also had to be discredited,<sup>92</sup> and this in turn led to his charge of blasphemy by the Jewish court<sup>93</sup> based on ways Jesus had

spoken of his relationship with the Father, and the charge of claiming to be king of the Jews before a Roman court by refusing to outrightly deny the title of Messiah.<sup>94</sup> The charge before the Roman court ultimately led to his execution. Yet, the story doesn't end there.

In his final chapter, Dodd asks: "how did [Jesus'] followers, who knew that he had been put to death by crucifixion, come to be convinced that he was still alive? To this question they give two answers: first, that the tomb in which the body of Jesus had been laid was subsequently found empty; and secondly, that he was seen, alive after death, by a number of his followers."<sup>95</sup> Though descriptions and accounts of the empty tomb are credible,<sup>96</sup> the empty tomb alone could not serve as sufficient reason to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus<sup>97</sup> because there could be other explanations for why the tomb is empty. This is why "the main weight...is placed on the testimony that Jesus was 'seem,' alive after death, by a number of his followers."<sup>98</sup> In fact, Dodd notes that only about twenty-five years after Jesus' death, Paul pens a list of all who had seen the risen Christ, details that had been passed on to him when he came to faith two decades before.<sup>99</sup> Dodd goes on to say, "We have here...a solid body of evidence from a date very close to the events. Something had happened to these men, which they could describe only by saying that they had 'seen the Lord.'"<sup>100</sup> While Dodd does say that "we have no evidence with which to check their claim,"<sup>101</sup> what is completely undeniable is the reality that "is known through the observable consequences"<sup>102</sup> that has been evident since those claims were made: not only were those who made the claim "new men, but it was also the birth of a new community."<sup>103</sup>

Throughout the book Dodd is meticulous to center on whatever information history has provided and on what the biblical records contain without stepping outside of those lines. An example of this is found in the last chapter where he surprisingly makes the observation that "Our gospels never set out to describe the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a concrete

occurrence.”<sup>104</sup> I confess that prior to this reading, I had not realized this detail, or at least had not thought of it in these terms. Just because the resurrection is alluded to in the text, this does not constitute an actual description of the event. Still, Dodd is intentional to point out the pieces of undeniable evidence that give us assurance of the credibility and historicity of the gospel accounts in our possession. Similar to how Jesus himself would tell stories throughout his teaching to allow his hearers to consider the implications of his words, Dodd has masterfully laid out and reinforced how improbable the existence of a Christian community of faith would be if not for some true and history-altering event (or rather person) that would have provoked it, and leaves it up to the reader to seriously ponder this. Overall, it has been incredibly refreshing to see how the very existence of the church stands as a testament to a historical event that has been recalled and retold over the centuries and which marks its very inception. As leaders in the body of Christ, we do well to learn the history of our faith, to trace back the events that lead to the birth of this “people of God” as Dodd has done, and to intentionally pass on this treasure to the next generation. Often times we are faithful to pass on the message of the gospel to others, but we forget to share the message along with the history that anchors our faith in a concrete moment in time. In a time when truth is said to be relative, the church has its existence, its practices, its documents, its history, and ultimately its Founder as bulwarks against such thinking.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> John Tudno Williams, “Dodd, Charles Harold (1884-1973), Biblical Scholar,” Dictionary of Welsh Biography, accessed February 21, 202, <https://biography.wales/article/s6-DODD-HAR-1884>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing, 1970), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Dodd, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Dodd, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Dodd, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Dodd, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Dodd, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Dodd, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Dodd, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Dodd, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Dodd, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Dodd, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Dodd, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Dodd, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Dodd, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Dodd, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Dodd, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Dodd, 27-28.

<sup>20</sup> Dodd, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Dodd, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Dodd, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Dodd, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Dodd, 33.

<sup>25</sup> Dodd, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Dodd, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Dodd, 41.

<sup>28</sup> Dodd, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Dodd, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Dodd, 43.

<sup>31</sup> Dodd, 43.

<sup>32</sup> Dodd, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Dodd, 44.

<sup>34</sup> Dodd, 45.

<sup>35</sup> Dodd, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Dodd, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Dodd, 56.

<sup>38</sup> Dodd, 56.

<sup>39</sup> Dodd, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Dodd, 57.

<sup>41</sup> Dodd, 59.

<sup>42</sup> Dodd, 58.

<sup>43</sup> Dodd, 64.

<sup>44</sup> Dodd, 69.

<sup>45</sup> Dodd, 73.

<sup>46</sup> Dodd, 77.

<sup>47</sup> Dodd, 90.

<sup>48</sup> Dodd, 89.

<sup>49</sup> Dodd, 88.

<sup>50</sup> Dodd, 90.

<sup>51</sup> Dodd, 91.

<sup>52</sup> Dodd, 91.

<sup>53</sup> Dodd, 92.

<sup>54</sup> Dodd, 92.

<sup>55</sup> Dodd, 93.

<sup>56</sup> Dodd, 94.

<sup>57</sup> Dodd, 95

<sup>58</sup> Dodd, 96.  
<sup>59</sup> Dodd, 96.  
<sup>60</sup> Dodd, 97.  
<sup>61</sup> Dodd, 103.  
<sup>62</sup> Dodd, 102.  
<sup>63</sup> Dodd, 104-105.  
<sup>64</sup> Dodd, 109.  
<sup>65</sup> Dodd, 105.  
<sup>66</sup> Dodd, 110-111.  
<sup>67</sup> Dodd, 112.  
<sup>68</sup> Dodd, 114.  
<sup>69</sup> Dodd, 120.  
<sup>70</sup> Dodd, 123.  
<sup>71</sup> Dodd, 123.  
<sup>72</sup> Dodd, 124.  
<sup>73</sup> Dodd, 126.  
<sup>74</sup> Dodd, 126.  
<sup>75</sup> Dodd, 127.  
<sup>76</sup> Dodd, 127.  
<sup>77</sup> Dodd, 129.  
<sup>78</sup> Dodd, 129.  
<sup>79</sup> Dodd, 129.  
<sup>80</sup> Dodd, 132.  
<sup>81</sup> Mark 8:17-20.  
<sup>82</sup> Dodd, 131.  
<sup>83</sup> Dodd, 132.  
<sup>84</sup> Dodd, 133.  
<sup>85</sup> Dodd, 132-133.  
<sup>86</sup> Dodd, 133.  
<sup>87</sup> Dodd, 133.  
<sup>88</sup> Dodd, 139.  
<sup>89</sup> Dodd, 146.  
<sup>90</sup> Dodd, 147.  
<sup>91</sup> Dodd, 147.  
<sup>92</sup> Dodd, 156.  
<sup>93</sup> Dodd, 158.  
<sup>94</sup> Dodd, 159.  
<sup>95</sup> Dodd, 163.  
<sup>96</sup> Dodd, 164.  
<sup>97</sup> Dodd, 165.  
<sup>98</sup> Dodd, 167.  
<sup>99</sup> Dodd, 168.  
<sup>100</sup> Dodd, 168.  
<sup>101</sup> Dodd, 170.  
<sup>102</sup> Dodd, 170.  
<sup>103</sup> Dodd, 171.  
<sup>104</sup> Dodd, 163.