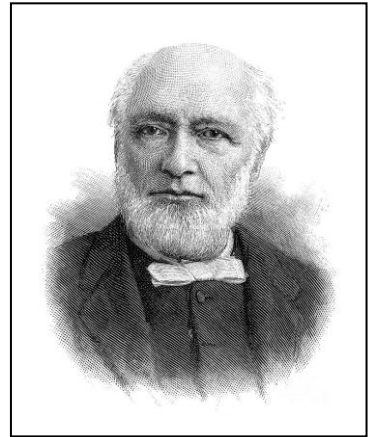


# The Founder of Christianity

PHILIP SCHAFF

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When “the fulness of the time” was come, God sent forth his only-begotten Son, “the Desire of all nations,” to redeem the world from the curse of sin, and to establish an everlasting kingdom of truth, love, and peace for all who should believe on his name.



In Jesus Christ a preparatory history both divine and human comes to its close. In him culminate all the previous revelations of God to Jews and Gentiles; and in him are fulfilled the deepest desires and efforts of both Gentiles and Jews for redemption. In his divine nature, as Logos, he is, according to St. John, the eternal Son of the Father, and the agent in the creation and preservation of the world, and in all those preparatory manifestations of God, which were completed in the incarnation. In his human nature, as Jesus of Nazareth, he is the ripe fruit of the religious growth of humanity, with an earthly ancestry, which St. Matthew (the evangelist of Israel) traces to Abraham, the patriarch of the Jews, and St. Luke (the evangelist of the Gentiles), to Adam, the father of all men. In him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily; and in him also is realized the ideal of human virtue and piety. He is the eternal Truth, and the divine Life itself, personally joined with our nature; he is our Lord and our God; yet at the same time flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. In him is solved the problem of religion, the reconciliation and fellowship of man with God; and we must expect no clearer revelation of God, nor any higher religious attainment of man, than is already guaranteed and actualized in his person.

But as Jesus Christ thus closes all previous history, so, on the other hand, he begins an endless future. He is the author of a new creation, the second Adam, the father of regenerate humanity, the head of the church, “which is his body, the fulness of him, that filleth all in all.” He is the pure fountain of that stream of light and life, which has since flowed unbroken through nations and ages, and will continue to flow, till the earth shall be full of his praise, and every tongue shall confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. The universal diffusion and absolute dominion of the spirit and life of Christ will be also the completion of the human race, the end of history, and the beginning of a glorious eternity.

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It is the great and difficult task of the biographer of Jesus to show how he, by external and internal development, under the conditions of a particular people, age, and country, came to be in fact what he was in idea and destination, and what he will continue to be for the faith of Christendom, the God-Man and Saviour of the world. Being divine from eternity, he could not become God; but as man he was subject to the laws of human life and gradual growth. "He advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."<sup>1</sup> Though he was the Son of God, "yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him."<sup>2</sup> There is no conflict between the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the ideal Christ of faith. The full understanding of his truly human life, by its very perfection and elevation above all other men before and after him, will necessarily lead to an admission of his own testimony concerning his divinity.

"Deep strike thy roots, O heavenly Vine,  
Within our earthly sod!  
Most human and yet most divine,  
The flower of man and God!"

Jesus Christ came into the world under Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor, before the death of king Herod the Great, four years before the traditional date of our Dionysian era. He was born at Bethlehem of Judaea, in the royal line of David, from Mary, "the wedded Maid and Virgin Mother." The world was at peace, and the gates of Janus were closed for only the second time in the history of Rome. There is a poetic and moral fitness in this coincidence: it secured a hearing for the gentle message of peace which might have been drowned in the passions of war and the clamor of arms. Angels from heaven proclaimed the good tidings of his birth with songs of praise; Jewish shepherds from the neighboring fields, and heathen sages from the far east greeted the newborn king and Saviour with the homage of believing hearts. Heaven and earth gathered in joyful adoration around the Christ-child, and the blessing of this event is renewed from year to year among high and low, rich and poor, old and young, throughout the civilized world.

The idea of a perfect childhood, sinless and holy, yet truly human and natural, had never entered the mind of poet or historian before; and when the legendary fancy of the Apocryphal Gospels attempted to fill out the chaste silence of the Evangelists, it painted an unnatural prodigy of a child to whom wild animals, trees, and dumb idols bowed, and who changed balls of clay into flying birds for the amusement of his playmates.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:52.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 5:8, 9.

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The youth of Jesus is veiled in mystery. We know only one, but a very significant fact. When a boy of twelve years he astonished the doctors in the temple by his questions and answers, without repelling them by immodesty and premature wisdom, and filled his parents with reverence and awe by his absorption in the things of his heavenly Father, and yet was subject and obedient to them in all things. Here, too, there is a clear line of distinction between the supernatural miracle of history and the unnatural prodigy of apocryphal fiction, which represents Jesus as returning most learned answers to perplexing questions of the doctors about astronomy, medicine, physics, metaphysics, and hyperphysics.<sup>3</sup>

The external condition and surroundings of his youth are in sharp contrast with the amazing result of his public life. He grew up quietly and unnoticed in a retired Galilean mountain village of proverbial insignificance, and in a lowly carpenter-shop, far away from the city of Jerusalem, from schools and libraries, with no means of instruction save those which were open to the humblest Jew—the care of godly parents, the beauties of nature, the services of the synagogue, the secret communion of the soul with God, and the Scriptures of the Old Testament, which recorded in type and prophecy his own character and mission. All attempts to derive his doctrine from any of the existing schools and sects have utterly failed. He never referred to the traditions of the elders except to oppose them. From the Pharisees and Sadducees he differed alike, and provoked their deadly hostility. With the Essenes he never came in contact. He was independent of human learning and literature, of schools and parties. He taught the world as one who owed nothing to the world. He came down from heaven and spoke out of the fulness of his personal intercourse with the great Jehovah. He was no scholar, no artist, no orator; yet was he wiser than all sages, he spake as never man spake, and made an impression on his age and all ages after him such as no man ever made or can make. Hence the natural surprise of his countrymen as expressed in the question: “From whence hath this man these things?” “How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?”<sup>4</sup>

He began his public ministry in the thirtieth year of his age, after the Messianic inauguration by the baptism of John, and after the Messianic probation in the wilderness—the counterpart of the temptation of the first Adam in Paradise. That ministry lasted only three years—and yet in these three years is condensed the deepest meaning of the history of religion. No great life ever passed so swiftly, so quietly, so humbly, so far removed from the noise and commotion of the world; and no great life after its close excited such universal and lasting interest. He was aware of this contrast: he predicted his deepest humiliation even to the death on the cross, and the subsequent

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<sup>3</sup> See Cowper, *l. c.* pp. 212–214.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 6:2, 3; Matthew 13:54–56; John 7:15.

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irresistible attraction of this cross, which may be witnessed from day to day wherever his name is known. He who could say, "If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men unto myself,"<sup>5</sup> knew more of the course of history and of the human heart than all the sages and legislators before and after him.

He chose twelve apostles for the Jews and seventy disciples for the Gentiles, not from among the scholars and leaders, but from among the illiterate fishermen of Galilee. He had no home, no earthly possessions, no friends among the mighty and the rich. A few pious women from time to time filled his purse; and this purse was in the hands of a thief and a traitor. He associated with publicans and sinners, to raise them up to a higher and nobler life, and began his reformation among the lower classes, which were despised and neglected by the proud hierarchy of the day. He never courted the favor of the great, but incurred their hatred and persecution. He never flattered the prejudices of the age, but rebuked sin and vice among the high and the low, aiming his severest words at the blind leaders of the blind, the self-righteous hypocrites who sat on Moses' seat. He never encouraged the carnal Messianic hopes of the people, but withdrew when they wished to make him a king, and declared before the representative of the Roman empire that his kingdom was not of this world. He announced to his disciples his own martyrdom, and promised to them in this life only the same baptism of blood. He went about in Palestine, often weary of travel, but never weary of his work of love, doing good to the souls and bodies of men, speaking words of spirit and life, and working miracles of power and mercy.

He taught the purest doctrine, as a direct revelation of his heavenly Father, from his own intuition and experience, and with a power and authority which commanded unconditional trust and obedience. He rose above the prejudices of party and sect, above the superstitions of his age and nation. He addressed the naked heart of man and touched the quick of the conscience. He announced the founding of a spiritual kingdom which should grow from the smallest seed to a mighty tree, and, working like leaven from within, should gradually pervade all nations and countries. This colossal idea, the like of which had never entered the imagination of men, he held fast even in the darkest hour of humiliation, before the tribunal of the Jewish high-priest and the Roman governor, and when suspended as a malefactor on the cross; and the truth of this idea is illustrated by every page of church history and in every mission station on earth.

The miracles or signs which accompanied his teaching are supernatural, but not unnatural, exhibitions of his power over man and nature; no violations of law, but manifestations of a higher law, the superiority of mind over matter, the superiority of

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<sup>5</sup> John 12:32.

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spirit over mind, the superiority of divine grace over human nature. They are all of the highest moral and of a profoundly symbolical significance, prompted by pure benevolence, and intended for the good of men; in striking contrast with deceptive juggler works and the useless and absurd miracles of apocryphal fiction. They were performed without any ostentation, with such simplicity and ease as to be called simply his "works." They were the practical proof of his doctrine and the natural reflex of his wonderful person. The absence of wonderful works in such a wonderful man would be the greatest wonder.

His doctrine and miracles were sealed by the purest and holiest life in private and public. He could challenge his bitterest opponents with the question: "Which of you convicteth me of sin?" well knowing that they could not point to a single spot.

At last he completed his active obedience by the passive obedience of suffering in cheerful resignation to the holy will of God. Hated and persecuted by the Jewish hierarchy, betrayed into their hands by Judas, accused by false witnesses, condemned by the Sanhedrin, rejected by the people, denied by Peter, but declared innocent by the representative of the Roman law and justice, surrounded by his weeping mother and faithful disciples, revealing in those dark hours by word and silence the gentleness of a lamb and the dignity of a God, praying for his murderers, dispensing to the penitent thief a place in paradise, committing his soul to his heavenly Father, he died, with the exclamation: "It is finished!" He died before he had reached the prime of manhood. The Saviour of the world a youth! He died the shameful death of the cross, the just for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty, a free self-sacrifice of infinite love, to reconcile the world unto God. He conquered sin and death on their own ground, and thus redeemed and sanctified all who are willing to accept his benefits and to follow his example. He instituted the Lord's Supper, to perpetuate the memory of his death and the cleansing and atoning power of his blood till the end of time.

The third day he rose from the grave, the conqueror of death and hell, the prince of life and resurrection. He repeatedly appeared to his disciples; he commissioned them to preach the gospel of the resurrection to every creature; he took possession of his heavenly throne, and by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit he established the church, which he has ever since protected, nourished, and comforted, and with which he has promised to abide, till he shall come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead.

This is a meagre outline of the story which the evangelists tell us with childlike simplicity, and yet with more general and lasting effect than could be produced by the highest art of historical composition. They modestly abstained from adding their own impressions to the record of the words and acts of the Master whose "glory they beheld, the glory as of the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."

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Who would not shrink from the attempt to describe the moral character of Jesus, or, having attempted it, be not dissatisfied with the result? Who can empty the ocean into a bucket? Who (we may ask with Lavater) “can paint the glory of the rising sun with a charcoal?” No artist’s ideal comes up to the reality in this case, though his ideals may surpass every other reality. The better and holier a man is, the more he feels his need of pardon, and how far he falls short of his own imperfect standard of excellence. But Jesus, with the same nature as ours and tempted as we are, never yielded to temptation; never had cause for regretting any thought, word, or action; he never needed pardon, or conversion, or reform; he never fell out of harmony with his heavenly Father. His whole life was one unbroken act of self-consecration to the glory of God and the eternal welfare of his fellow-men. A catalogue of virtues and graces, however complete, would give us but a mechanical view. It is the spotless purity and sinlessness of Jesus as acknowledged by friend and foe; it is the even harmony and symmetry of all graces, of love to God and love to man, of dignity and humility of strength and tenderness, of greatness and simplicity, of self-control and submission, of active and passive virtue; it is, in one word, the absolute perfection which raises his character high above the reach of all other men and makes it an exception to a universal rule, a moral miracle in history. It is idle to institute comparisons with saints and sages, ancient or modern. Even the infidel Rousseau was forced to exclaim: “If Socrates lived and died like a sage, Jesus lived and died like a God.” Here is more than the starry heaven above us, and the moral law within us, which filled the soul of Kant with ever-growing reverence and awe. Here is the holy of holies of humanity, here is the very gate of heaven.

Going so far in admitting the human perfection of Christ—and how can the historian do otherwise?—we are driven a step farther, to the acknowledgment of his amazing claims, which must either be true, or else destroy all foundation for admiration and reverence in which he is universally held. It is impossible to construct a life of Christ without admitting its supernatural and miraculous character.

The divinity of Christ, and his whole mission as Redeemer, is an article of faith, and, as such, above logical or mathematical demonstration. The incarnation or the union of the infinite divinity and finite humanity in one person is indeed the mystery of mysteries. “What can be more glorious than God? What more vile than flesh? What more wonderful than God in the flesh?”<sup>6</sup> Yet aside from all dogmatizing which lies outside of the province of the historian, the divinity of Christ has a self-evidencing power which forces itself irresistibly upon the reflecting mind and historical inquirer; while the denial of it makes his person an inexplicable enigma.

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine: “*Deus; quid gloriosius? Caro; quid vilis? Deus in carne; quid mirabilis?*”

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It is inseparable from his own express testimony respecting himself, as it appears in every Gospel, with but a slight difference of degree between the Synoptists and St. John. Only ponder over it! He claims to be the long-promised Messiah who fulfilled the law and the prophets, the founder and lawgiver of a new and universal kingdom, the light of the world, the teacher of all nations and ages, from whose authority there is no appeal. He claims to have come into this world for the purpose to save the world from sin—which no merely human being can possibly do. He claims the power to forgive sins on earth; he frequently exercised that power, and it was for the sins of mankind, as he foretold, that he shed his own blood. He invites all men to follow him, and promises peace and life eternal to every one that believes in him. He claims pre-existence before Abraham and the world, divine names, attributes, and worship. He disposes from the cross of places in Paradise. In directing his disciples to baptize all nations, he coordinates himself with the eternal Father and the Divine Spirit, and promises to be with them to the consummation of the world and to come again in glory as the Judge of all men. He, the humblest and meekest of men, makes these astounding pretensions in the most easy and natural way; he never falters, never apologizes, never explains; he proclaims them as self-evident truths. We read them again and again, and never feel any incongruity nor think of arrogance and presumption.

And yet this testimony, if not true, must be downright blasphemy or madness. The former hypothesis cannot stand a moment before the moral purity and dignity of Jesus, revealed in his every word and work, and acknowledged by universal consent. Self-deception in a matter so momentous, and with an intellect in all respects so clear and so sound, is equally out of the question. How could He be an enthusiast or a madman who never lost the even balance of his mind, who sailed serenely over all the troubles and persecutions, as the sun above the clouds, who always returned the wisest answer to tempting questions, who calmly and deliberately predicted his death on the cross, his resurrection on the third day, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the founding of his Church, the destruction of Jerusalem—predictions which have been literally fulfilled? A character so original, so complete, so uniformly consistent, so perfect, so human and yet so high above all human greatness, can be neither a fraud nor a fiction. The poet, as has been well said, would in this case be greater than the hero. It would take more than a Jesus to invent a Jesus.

We are shut up then to the recognition of the divinity of Christ; and reason itself must bow in silent awe before the tremendous word: "I and the Father are one!" and respond with skeptical Thomas: "My Lord and my God!"

This conclusion is confirmed by the effects of the manifestation of Jesus, which far transcend all merely human capacity and power. The history of Christianity, with its

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countless fruits of a higher and purer life of truth and love than was ever known before or is now known outside of its influence, is a continuous commentary on the life of Christ, and testifies on every page to the inspiration of his holy example. His power is felt on every Lord's Day from ten thousand pulpits, in the palaces of kings and the huts of beggars, in universities and colleges, in every school where the sermon on the Mount is read, in prisons, in almshouses, in orphan asylums, as well as in happy homes, in learned works and simple tracts in endless succession. If this history of ours has any value at all, it is a new evidence that Christ is the light and life of a fallen world.

And there is no sign that his power is waning. His kingdom is more widely spread than ever before, and has the fairest prospect of final triumph in all the earth. Napoleon at St. Helena is reported to have been struck with the reflection that millions are now ready to die for the crucified Nazarene who founded a spiritual empire by love, while no one would die for Alexander, or Caesar, or himself, who founded temporal empires by force. He saw in this contrast a convincing argument for the divinity of Christ, saying: "I know men, and I tell you, Christ was not a man. Everything about Christ astonishes me. His spirit overwhelms and confounds me. There is no comparison between him and any other being. He stands single and alone."<sup>7</sup> And Goethe, another commanding genius, of very different character, but equally above suspicion of partiality for religion, looking in the last years of his life over the vast field of history, was constrained to confess that "if ever the Divine appeared on earth, it was in the Person of Christ," and that "the human mind, no matter how far it may advance in every other department, will never transcend the height and moral culture of Christianity as it shines and glows in the Gospels."

The rationalistic, mythical, and legendary attempts to explain the life of Christ on purely human and natural grounds, and to resolve the miraculous elements either into common events, or into innocent fictions, split on the rock of Christ's character and testimony. The ablest of the infidel biographers of Jesus now profess the profoundest regard for his character, and laud him as the greatest sage and saint that ever appeared on earth. But, by rejecting his testimony concerning his divine origin and mission, they turn him into a liar; and, by rejecting the miracle of the resurrection, they make the great fact of Christianity a stream without a source, a house without a foundation, an effect without a

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<sup>7</sup> On the testimony of Napoleon to the divinity of Christ see the letters of Bersier and Lutteroth appended to the twelfth ed. of my book on the *Person of Christ* (1882), p. 284, and pp. 219 sqq. Napoleon is reported to have asked the poet Wieland at a court-ball in Weimar, during the Congress of Erfurt, whether he doubted that Jesus ever lived; to which Wieland promptly and emphatically replied in the negative, adding that with equal right a thousand years hence men might deny the existence of Napoleon or the battle of Jena. The emperor smiled and said, *très-bien!* The question was designed not to express doubt, but to test the poet's faith. So Dr. Hase reports from the mouth of Chancellor Müller, who heard the conversation. *Geschichte Jesu*, p. 9.



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cause. Denying the physical miracles, they expect us to believe even greater psychological miracles; yea, they substitute for the supernatural miracle of history an unnatural prodigy and incredible absurdity of their imagination. They moreover refute and supersede each other. The history of error in the nineteenth century is a history of self-destruction. A hypothesis was scarcely matured before another was invented and substituted, to meet the same fate in its turn; while the old truth and faith of Christendom remains unshaken, and marches on in its peaceful conquest against sin and error

Truly, Jesus Christ, the Christ of the Gospels, the Christ of history, the crucified and risen Christ, the divine-human Christ, is the most real, the most certain, the most blessed of all facts. And this fact is an ever-present and growing power which pervades the church and conquers the world, and is its own best evidence, as the sun shining in the heavens. This fact is the only solution of the terrible mystery of sin and death, the only inspiration to a holy life of love to God and man, the only guide to happiness and peace. Systems of human wisdom will come and go, kingdoms and empires will rise and fall, but for all time to come Christ will remain "the Way, the Truth, and the Life."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Schaff, P., & Schaff, D. S. (1910). *History of the Christian Church* (1:100–111). Charles Scribner's Sons.