

*The*  
PROBLEM  
*with*  
CHRIST

Why we don't  
understand Jesus,  
His enemies,  
or the early church.

CHRISTOPHER GORTON

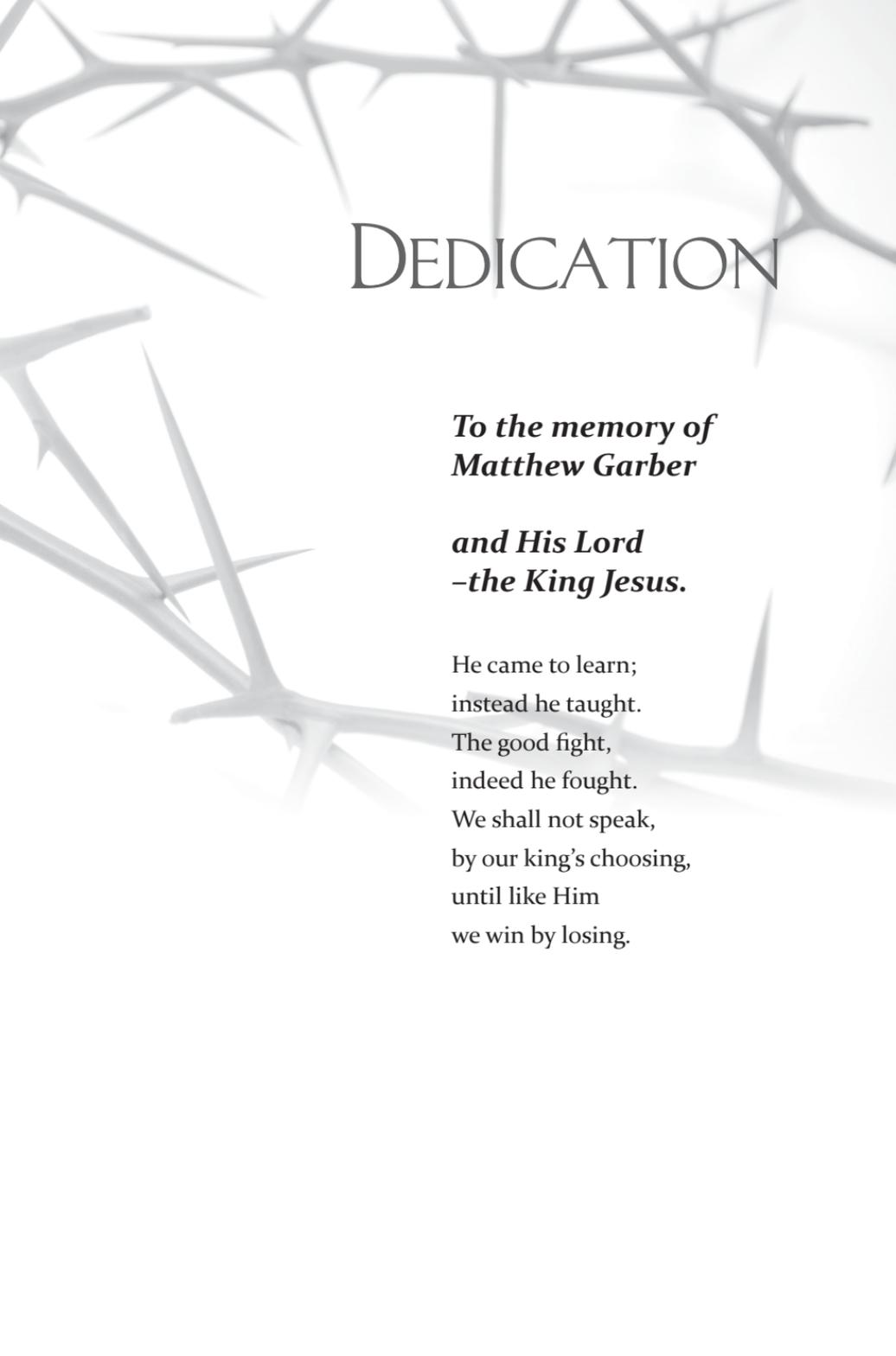
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# DEDICATION

*To the memory of  
Matthew Garber*

*and His Lord  
-the King Jesus.*

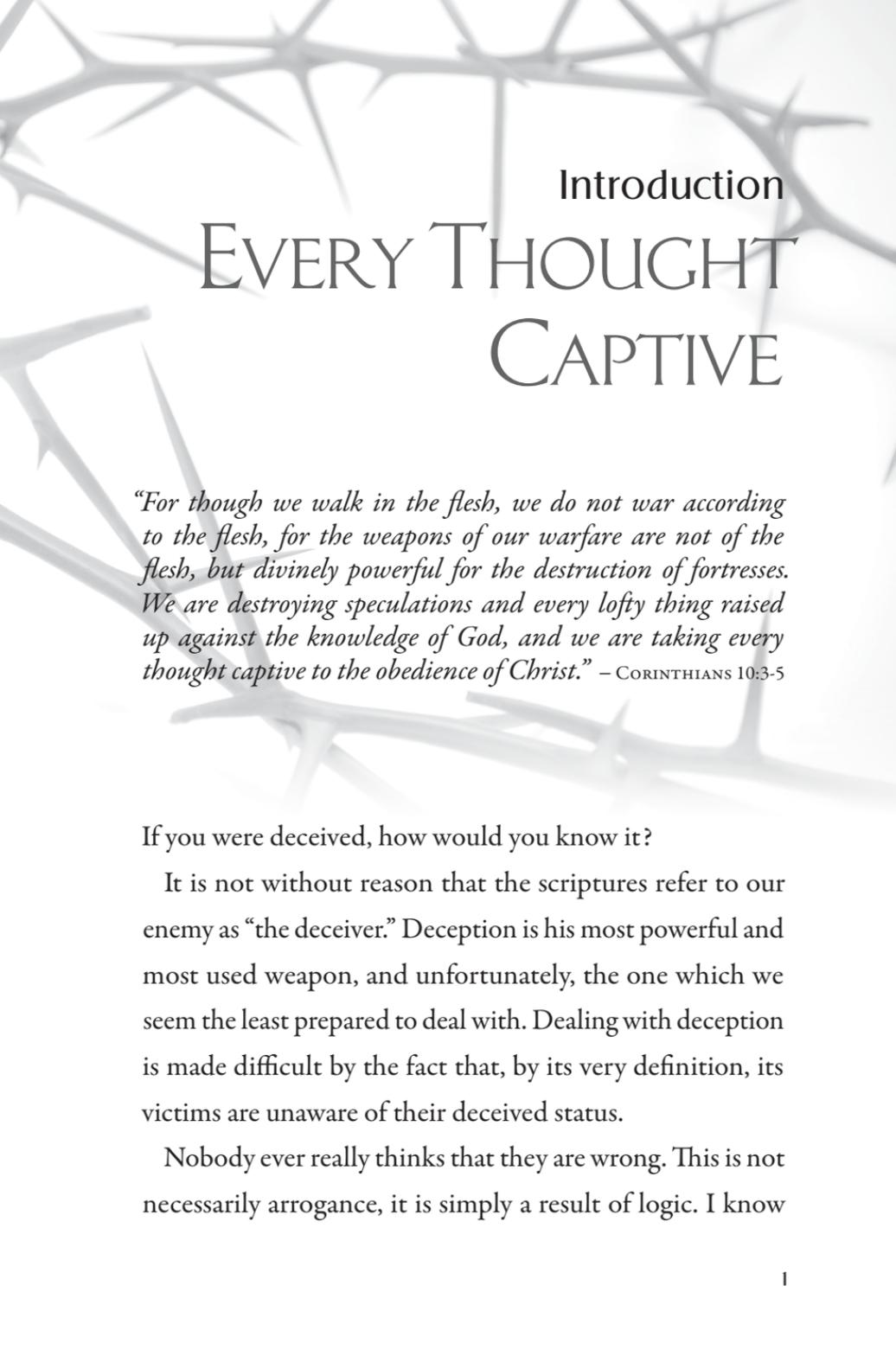
He came to learn;  
instead he taught.  
The good fight,  
indeed he fought.  
We shall not speak,  
by our king's choosing,  
until like Him  
we win by losing.



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The background of the page is a light gray, semi-transparent image of thorns, likely representing the crown of thorns. The thorns are sharp and branch out across the entire page, creating a subtle, textured backdrop for the text.

## Introduction

# EVERY THOUGHT CAPTIVE

*“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” – CORINTHIANS 10:3-5*

If you were deceived, how would you know it?

It is not without reason that the scriptures refer to our enemy as “the deceiver.” Deception is his most powerful and most used weapon, and unfortunately, the one which we seem the least prepared to deal with. Dealing with deception is made difficult by the fact that, by its very definition, its victims are unaware of their deceived status.

Nobody ever really thinks that they are wrong. This is not necessarily arrogance, it is simply a result of logic. I know

that I certainly do not want to believe untruth, and that if I find an error in my thinking I proceed to change it. You think the same way. Nobody wants to be wrong — therefore we all think that we are right!<sup>1</sup>

Of course, because we know arrogance is not a Christian trait, we don't unapologetically declare that we are right. Instead, we make it clear that we do not know everything, and that, doubtless, some of what we believe is in error. Yet, when we are pressed on specifics, we discover our own belief in our own inerrancy!

For the Christian, this whole problem of belief versus deception is compounded by the fact that we admittedly “walk by faith and not by sight.” We rightly steel ourselves against the onslaught of ungodly errors that society hurls at us, and while we may not have ready answers for the seemingly intellectual arguments a materialist might raise, we rest in faith that our God did, indeed, create “the heavens, the earth, the seas, and all that they contain.” Unfortunately, this can lead to an inappropriate inflexibility when we confuse genuine Biblical teaching with erroneous presuppositions. An example of this can be seen in those whose proper respect for the divinely-inspired Bible becomes inappropriately attached to a particular system of theology.

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<sup>1</sup> I am speaking of cognitive and not moral error here. Hopefully, we recognize that in our battle with sinful behavior we all have room for improvement and can indeed point to specific areas in which we are in need of assistance. (This is not to say that there is not an interplay in both directions between cognitive and moral error.)

But even more insidious are cultural biases that blind us to clear Biblical teaching, and reinterpret them in ways that destroy the author's intent. For example, consider the hermeneutic of the southern slave owners of America's antebellum south, many of who claimed to be (and presumably truly were trying to be) followers of Jesus. In the Biblical instructions concerning the treatment of slaves, they found a divine approval of the practice of slavery, rather than a limitation of its evils.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to remember that these cultural biases do not exist solely in secular society, but also within churches and denominations. It was these chains of blindness that bound the people of Israel, and for which Jesus had the least tolerance. Those who were bound by failure and who recognized their moral poverty received Jesus' mercy, while those who nullified God's word by their systemic re-interpretation earned His harshest words.

They were not simply in error—they were deceived. Error, while it may be corporate, is essentially a one-sided affair. Deception, on the other hand is two-sided; there exists the deceived, and the deceiver. It implies that an advantage accrues to the deceiver at the expense of the deceived. The

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<sup>2</sup> I hope that I will not scare you off by pointing out that there is not one example in the New Testament where wives are told to be submissive to their husbands that the immediate context does not include similar instruction to slaves concerning their masters! The normative instruction is that we submit to one another as servants of our King.

active work of the deceiver insures that deception is more difficult to escape than simple error or ignorance. The latter two may be overcome by simple education, often with no more consequence than simple embarrassment. Deception is much more difficult to overcome because it is actively maintained. Not to mention that we face a deceptive enemy who is capable of placing first-person thoughts into our minds—an enemy our residual fallen nature is in cahoots with. The habits of mind and body that we learned before coming to our King only reinforce his deception.

How might we escape?

First of all, we need to recognize that God gives light to those who respond to the light they have received. In affluent societies such as ours it is disturbing to see the extent to which those who claim to follow Jesus refuse to walk in radical (basic) obedience to His guidance. Re-read the gospels, noting His economic teaching and consider 1 John 2:6: “The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.” Refusal to grow in obedience on these most basic, clear, and indisputable fronts is a sure recipe for opening the door to the enemy’s deception.

Next to obedience to the things you already understand; becoming a servant is the first and foremost way to show God you are ready for more light. For instance, ask God to

show you someone in your life who is difficult to love, and then seek ways to help that person see God's love in your behavior towards them. Third, ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you any area in which you are deceived. It may be that a strong man has taken over and you are a prisoner in your own house—pray that you be set free and that he be bound. Be forewarned, God has promised to deliver us from our enemies, not our friends! It is likely that if you are deceived, your enemy has insured that you are very comfortable in that state. Rest assured that, if you are deceived, he will see to it that you are unaware of that deception and enlist your participation in resisting any attempt at enlightenment.

Which brings us to the subject at hand. You are about to turn the page in a book<sup>3</sup> that may also be the turning of a metaphorical page of your life. Based on previous experience, I feel quite certain the enemy will try to convince you that what you are reading is not revealing deception, but is itself an attempt to deceive you. That may be true! I seriously suggest that you pause right now and pray; seek God's counsel as to whether or not you should continue; and if so, petition both His protection and wisdom to recognize the truth and the courage to act on it.

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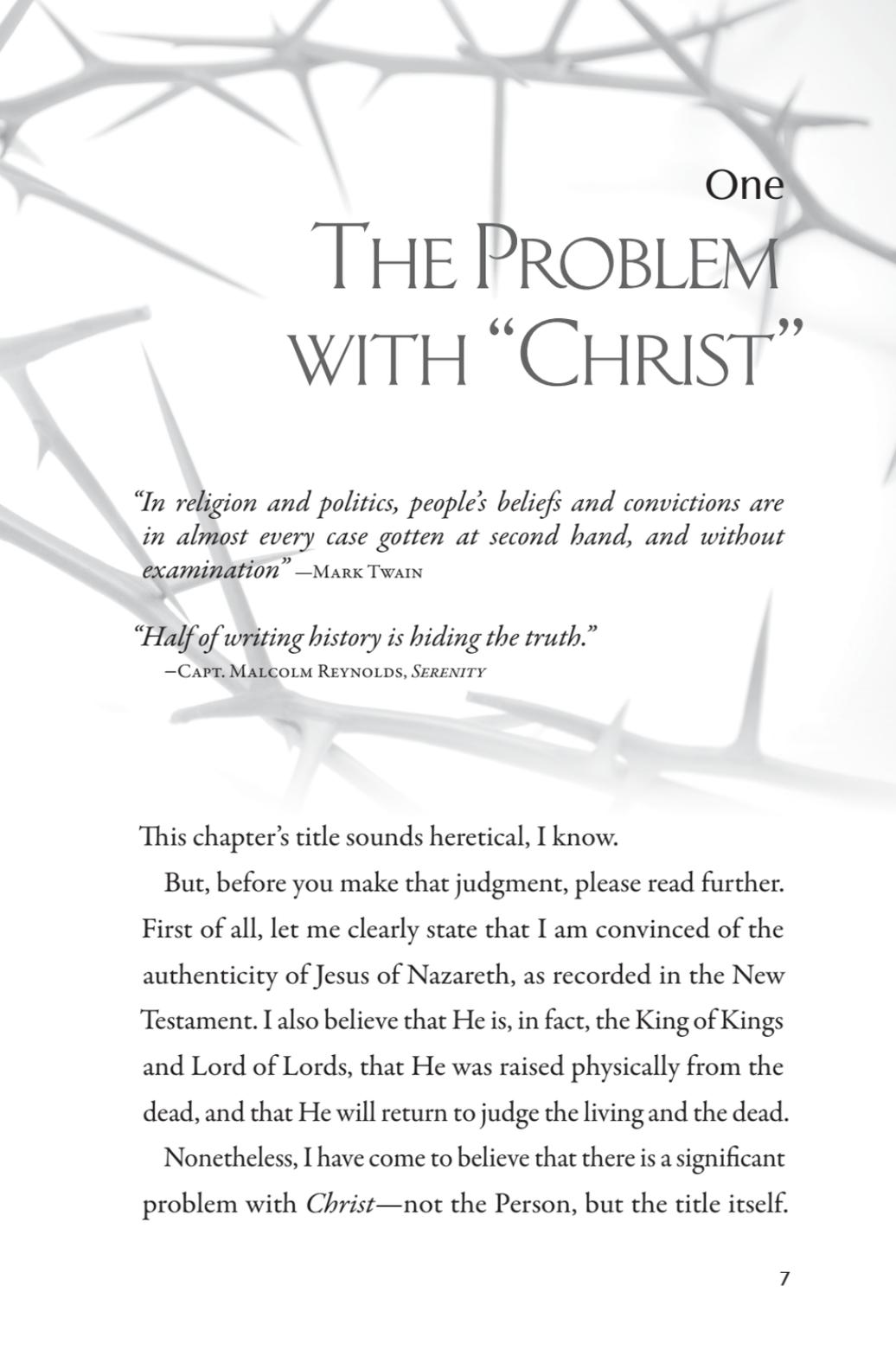
3 Please understand that this is the first in a series of works which is far from complete, regarding the history and theology of the kingdom of God, with significant emphasis on Biblical cosmology and spiritual warfare. Comments, questions, and corrections are welcome and encouraged by the author. He can be contacted via his blog: [RadicalFish.net](http://RadicalFish.net)

I begin by presenting a simple fact, one that can be easily confirmed. It is my prayer that the realization of the church's (and maybe your) ignorance of that surprising fact will be the alarm that wakes her (and you) to the awareness of a great deception that the enemy has used to turn her into a zombie in his service on the world stage. You will be tempted to dismiss what you learn as a simple piece of trivia, but I submit it is a key that unlocks the purpose and power of God in this age. Who has not read the book of Acts and wondered why we do not see such things today? I make a bold claim—we have been deceived; we do not know clearly what we have been saved from—or for!

Proceed in His favor, secure in His love, with eyes wide open, seeking His Truth.

Favor and peace in Him Whom we serve,

Christopher Gorton



One  
THE PROBLEM  
WITH “CHRIST”

*“In religion and politics, people’s beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second hand, and without examination”* —MARK TWAIN

*“Half of writing history is hiding the truth.”*

—CAPT. MALCOLM REYNOLDS, *SERENITY*

This chapter’s title sounds heretical, I know.

But, before you make that judgment, please read further. First of all, let me clearly state that I am convinced of the authenticity of Jesus of Nazareth, as recorded in the New Testament. I also believe that He is, in fact, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, that He was raised physically from the dead, and that He will return to judge the living and the dead.

Nonetheless, I have come to believe that there is a significant problem with *Christ*—not the Person, but the title itself.

In fact, I believe that the problem is so serious that I have personally concluded that those who claim to truly follow Him should no longer use the term, other than in special and limited circumstances. If you have the patience, read on to discover what has brought me to that conclusion.

Meanwhile, an example may help clarify my point. There are many Christians today who take strong exception to the use of the term “X-mas” when referring in writing—or even worse in speaking—of Christmas. On the other hand, those who use the term often maintain that they are only using a long, time-honored church tradition—abbreviating the Greek word for Christ (Χριστός), only using the first letter to represent the whole word. Those who oppose the use of X-mas, however, maintain that, whatever *X* might have stood for in the past, today it is universally used in its algebraic sense to stand for an unknown. All the arguments in its favor, they maintain, are simply an excuse to remove one more vestige of Christian influence from an increasingly secularized society.

Personally, I have come to see this controversy as something of a “tempest in a teapot,” designed to distract us from more pressing issues, such as the problem with *Christ* itself. If someone opposes the use of *X-mas*, I can only point out that, in some sense, even the word *Christ* has become an *X* in its own right—a title that has been stripped of its original

meaning and made so nondescript and impotent as to lose its usefulness.

The fact of the matter is, the world is already ignorant of Him, as is Christianity itself, in a large measure. (I am simply using the word Christianity here in reference to those who call themselves Christians.)

While the Holy Spirit has indeed shed abroad the truth of “Christ” in the hearts of His followers, He has often done so without recourse to the first-century clarity of the word *Christ* itself. I hope to show you that, for almost 1,700 years, we’ve replaced the truth of “Christ” with another *X*—namely the word *Christ* itself!

So, what does *Christ* mean?

For several years, I have been asking individuals and groups this question, and have been dismayed to find no one that could give an answer that I felt was correct. At first I was tempted to believe—as you may be tempted now—that this was proof of my supreme arrogance, and/or self-delusion. This seemed far more likely than the possibility that the essential meaning of the central word of our faith, and the source of our identity as believers, could have been stolen from us long ago.

That said, I have been comforted by the fact that most people realized right away that they had no idea what *Christ* meant, and that they had simply resorted to guessing. (Typically,

guesses included Savior, Blessed, Crucified, God, or even the last name of Jesus.) When they heard what follows they were in joyous agreement. (For any scholars reading this, I should point out that the answer is not merely “messiah,” nor “anointed,” but please keep reading....)

It needs to be emphasized here that we are not speaking of new truths. The Holy Spirit has already convinced you of the essential meaning of the word *Christ* if you are truly His follower; it is simply that God has allowed the enemy an apparent victory in rendering the word void of significance. By God’s grace, you will soon see how this happened, and why I make the ridiculous sounding claim that true followers of “The Christ” should no longer use the term.

#### **A DISTURBING DISCOVERY**

Before sharing the solution to this puzzle, I should also share how I became aware of it. Some years ago the Lord led me, with my family, to abandon a successful career as a science teacher and move to Costa Rica to be salt and light in a small rural community. Obviously, one of our first priorities there was to learn Spanish in order to communicate the gospel—and to buy groceries and find the bathroom. To this end, I determined to start doing my personal Bible reading in Spanish, and obtained a Bible that had Spanish and English columns side by side. This proved to be an

incredible blessing, not only in advancing my Spanish, but also in understanding the Word.

One day I was reading in John chapter one, and noticed something strange. Many of you may not have access to a Spanish/English Bible, so I have reproduced the selection below. You will find the four pertinent verses reproduced with the important sections in bold and italic. Please read over both sections; you should not need to understand Spanish to see what I observed.

San Juan 1

38 Jesús se volvió, y viendo que le seguían, les dijo\*: ¿Qué buscáis? Y ellos le dijeron: *Rabí* (*que traducido quiere decir, Maestro*), ¿dónde te hospedas?  
41 El encontró\* primero a su hermano Simón, y le dijo\*: Hemos hallado *al Mesías* (*que traducido quiere decir, Cristo*).

John 1

38 And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them\*, “What do you seek?” They said to Him, “*Rabbi* (*which translated means Teacher*), where are You staying?”  
41 He found\* first his own brother Simon and said\* to him, “We have found *the Messiah*” (*which translated means Christ*).

Did you see it? Great, but if not, go back and read just the emphasized phrases, paying special attention to the four pairs of underlined words. I had probably read this passage in English a hundred times, but had never seen what I now saw. Even now, I only saw it because I had the English and Spanish versions side by side. There is a profound asymmetry in the first two pairs of underlined words, compared to the second pair. Please note the pairs:

Spanish Bible		English Bible	
Rabi	Maestro	Rabbi	Teacher
Transliterated Aramaic	Spanish word	Transliterated Aramaic	English word
<b>Mesias</b>	<b>Cristo</b>	<b>Messiah</b>	<b>Christ</b>
Transliterated Aramaic	Transliterated Greek!	Transliterated Aramaic	Transliterated Greek!

Once the significance of this asymmetry is understood, the implications are stunning. The first word of each pair, in both Spanish and English, (columns one and three), are almost identical. This is because these words have been transliterated out of Aramaic<sup>4</sup> into Greek by John, and modern translators continue this practice to accurately portray what he was trying to express. (*Transliteration* is when a word is changed from one language to conform to the characters, pronunciation and spelling norms of another.)

The second word in each pair should be the translation of the first, so in the second and fourth columns we should find very different words. In the top row this is the case, but then something goes awry. In this chart, what one would expect to find paired with *Mesias*, or *Messiah*, would be a Spanish or English word. Instead, what we find is a transliteration of a Greek word; Χριστός, (*christos*), Cristo in Spanish and Christ in English. They both bear striking similarity to the

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<sup>4</sup> Aramaic is a Semitic language similar to Hebrew which was the home language of Palestinian Jews of Jesus' day.

Greek *christos* because they are transliterated, *not* translated.

It could be argued that this similarity is because Spanish and English have common, historic influence from Latin, and that the word *Christ* came in to each language via the Latin. As we will see, there is a strong element of truth in this, but this commonality has only served to confuse, rather than clarify the meaning.

Just for the sake of argument, look at two non-Latin language Bibles. The first is from the African Swahili language translation, done by the International Bible Society<sup>5</sup>

38. Yesu akageuka akawaona wakimfuata akawauliza, “Mnataka nini?” Wakamwambia, ‘ **Rabi**’ . . . 41. Mara baada ya haya Andrea alikwenda kumtafuta ndugu yake akamwambia, “Tumemwona **Masihi**,” yaani **Kristo**.

Next, travel east to the Philippines, where Tagalog is the most common language.<sup>6</sup>

38. Paglingon ni Jesus at nakita silang sumusunod. Sinabi niya sa kanila: Ano ang nyong hinahanap? Sinabi nila sa kaniya: **Rabbi**, na kung liliwanagin ay Guro, saan ka nakatira? . . . 41. Una niyang hinanap ang kaniyang sariling kapatid na si Simon at sinabi sa kaniya: Natagpuan namin ang Mesiyas. Ang kahulugan ng **Mesiyas** ay **Cristo**.

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5 This IBS translation of the New Testament is for the Tanzanian dialect of the Swahili language, which is primarily used in the United Republic of Tanzania. An estimated 30 million people speak this language as their mother tongue. This translation uses an informal language style and applies a meaning-based translation philosophy. It was translated consulting the biblical languages and was completed in 1989.

6 Tagalog is the most spoken Philippine language in terms of number of speakers. The selection is from Ang Salita ng Diyos translation.

I have again taken the liberty of emphasizing the words under consideration. Note that in these cases, since we have no knowledge of Swahili or Tagalog, we cannot even identify which word represents teacher in those languages, but we have no problem finding the match for the words which have been transliterated from the Greek text, such as *Christo!* There is no doubt that an appeal to common Latin roots cannot be made in these examples, and we must acknowledge that the Greek word *christos* is simply not being translated beyond the Greek. Ultimately, that also means that no real, end-language meaning is being imparted to the reader by its use. (Again, it is important that we remember the distinction between translation and transliteration: *translation conveys meaning; transliteration conveys sound.*)

#### ANCIENT WORDS FROM LONG DEAD TONGUES

So, why did John include both the original Aramaic and the translated Greek terms in the first place?

John opened both his gospel and his first letter similarly—with philosophic claims well understood by the Greek and Jewish readers of his day<sup>7</sup>. But he does not remain merely philosophical; instead, he jolts his readers by claiming that the Platonic and Gnostic ideal of pure, untouchable, spiritual truth (the *Logos* or *Word*, which under-girded and created

<sup>7</sup> Gary M. Burge in *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.* by William D. Mounce (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003), p. 75.

physical reality but could not touch or be touched by it) had invaded history in person, in the form of Jesus of Nazareth! “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory....” “What was from the Beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the Word of Life....”

These statements were a bold claim on John’s part—a startling contention that he was not simply presenting a new philosophy or a reformed Jewish sect, but the fulfillment of the deepest desire of the Greek and Jewish psyche—the desire to know Truth. In Jesus, truth was no longer a hidden shadow in a cave, or an untouchable secret knowledge, but as a real Human who came with power and authority, demonstrating that He had the complete right to be the—but we are getting ahead of ourselves!

Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, John continues his historical account, moving quickly from broad philosophic claims to the actual story of Jesus’ dusty, real-world rural life in first-century Palestine. While his subject is clearly epic, he does not choose to use the poetic style of the classic Greeks; instead John writes as the simple fisherman he is, using the common Greek of his day. He puts his readers right in the middle of the action by making frequent use of the Greek

historical present. (This is indicated by the numerous stars found in the *New American Standard Bible* version of his Gospel.<sup>8</sup>)

Additionally, he keeps his readers in the action of the story by allowing them to hear the actual sounds of speakers recorded in his dialogs. Because of this, we have the four word pairs that we've been considering.

Using these techniques, John is emphasizing the fact that his story is real, a historical account of something that actually occurred in time and space. There is nothing akin to this in the epic poems of Classical Greece. If there were, there might not be such argument over how Classical Greek was pronounced,<sup>9</sup> or if the epics were intended to be understood as real history.<sup>10</sup> But John does intend for us to understand him in this way. And so, even today we are privileged to hear echoes of words uttered by real people in long-dead tongues from almost 2,000 years ago—words such as *rabbi*, *messiah* and *Cephas*.

These words are Aramaic, however, and John was writing to

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8 The introduction to the NASB states: "A star is used to mark verbs that are historical presents in the Greek which have been translated with an English past tense in order to conform to modern usage. The translators recognized that in some contexts the present tense seems more unexpected and unjustified to the English reader than a past tense would have been. But Greek authors frequently used the present tense for the sake of heightened vividness, thereby transporting their readers in imagination to the actual scene at the time of occurrence. However, the translators felt that it would be wise to change these historical presents to English past tenses."

9 W. J. Purton, *Pronunciation of Ancient Greek* (BiblioLife LLC, 2008).

10 Moses I. Finley and Simon Hornblower, *The World of Odysseus* (London, England: Folio Society, 2002).

a Greek-speaking audience. Though many of his readers were Jews, most of them were more comfortable with Greek than they were with Hebrew<sup>11</sup>, and many of them from areas outside of the immediate middle-east would not have been comfortable with Aramaic.

This fact can most-easily be appreciated when we consider the context of the miracle of tongues that occurred at the celebration of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts chapter two. All those visitors to Jerusalem, hearing the good news of Jesus in their own languages, were Jews by birth or proselytes! In addition, the most widely read version of the Old Testament, was not Hebrew, but rather the Greek Septuagint, and it was this version that was almost exclusively quoted by both Jesus and His followers.<sup>12</sup>

Because of this, John not only provided the sounds of the Aramaic words, but also provided the Greek translation of them. He let his readers hear the Aramaic *rabbi* by using the Greek characters ραββι (*rabbi*), and then provided the Greek word Διδάσκαλε, (*Didaskale*) as a translation. He then did the same for the Aramaic *messiah*, using the Greek letters Μεσσίαν, (*messian*), then translating it to the Greek word χριστός, (*christos*). Today, it is left for us to discover what

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11 Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights Into the New Testament* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 180. Turner goes so far to say that based on an analysis of the New Testament texts; "From this evidence one would suppose that Jesus knew the Scriptures in Greek but not in Hebrew."

12 Ibid.

English word we should use in translating this Greek word *christos*, as well as its Aramaic original, *messiah*.

First, though, it would be prudent to consider how others have answered the *christos* question.

The simplest answer should be to check a dictionary, and all give basically the same definition. I happen to have a *Webster's New World Dictionary with Student Handbook*<sup>13</sup> in front of me, and it states: Christ (krīst) [< LL. < Gr. *christos*, the anointed (in NT. Messiah) < *chriein*, to anoint] Jesus of Nazareth, regarded by Christians as the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament.

There you have it, short and sweet, without any mystery or intrigue. The English word *Christ*, is taken from the Greek word *christos*, which means “the anointed” and is equivalent to the Aramaic word Messiah. Case closed—or is it?

The fact of the matter is that virtually no one thinks *anointed* when they hear the word Christ, nor do any popular translations of the Bible use it as a translation of the Greek *christos*.

The issue is clouded further by the fact that more and more English translations are following the trend, as seen in the Today's New International Version (TNIV),<sup>14</sup> of irregularly rendering the Greek word *christos* into English as

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<sup>13</sup> No Author Identified, *Webster's New World Dictionary with Student Handbook: Young People's Edition* (Southwestern, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood, *Zondervan TNIV Study Bible*. (Zondervan, 2006).

*Messiah*—an Aramaic word<sup>15</sup>. The translators must believe that the average English-speaking reader is more familiar with the meaning of the Aramaic word *messiah*, than were the Jews of John’s day.

This growing use of *messiah* in place of *christos*, by translators, seems to also be driven by a recognition that *christos* is not a name. *Messiah* has the advantage of being a title, but it has been subject to the same obfuscation as *christos*. English dictionaries say it means “promised one” or “deliverer,” which misses the Aramaic, or Hebrew, equivalent entirely.

In short, they are still transliterating rather than translating!

And do remember, John is the only New Testament author to use the word *messiah*. He does so twice,<sup>16</sup> and both times he also provides the translation as *christos* in the immediate context.

It should also be noted that, besides conveying sound, as is appropriate in the case of proper nouns, transliteration has at least two other legitimate uses—it may be used when the true meaning of the word being translated is unknown, or when there is no equivalent word in the target language. As we will see, neither of these cases applies here.

In order to understand why *messiah* or *christos* should not normally be translated using the word *anointed*, it is

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<sup>15</sup> Many assume this to be a Hebrew word, and while it is similar to the Hebrew *mashiach*, it is not the same.

<sup>16</sup> John 1:41,4:25

important to remember the distinction between denotation and connotation. The denotation of a word is where it comes from—its origin. In the dictionary definition for *Christ*, above, the denotation is given in brackets as “the anointed.” *Anointed* means, literally, “smeared with oil.”

On the other hand, the connotation is what people think and feel when they use the word; what we typically call the definition. Usually the denotation and connotation are the same, or at least very close. Sometimes, however, the two can be quite different, as in the following, somewhat humorous example.

Consider the English word *nice* and its Spanish cognate; *necia*. Few English speakers would consider it an insult to be described as nice, but any dictionary will tell you that its denotation is from the Latin *nescius*, which means ignorant. *Nice* is generally translated into Spanish with *amable*, which translates back into English as amiable, or friendly, so it is not really equivalent. The Spanish word *necia* literally means fool, and has retained more of the meaning of the original Latin than has English. In a related but opposite manner, the equivalent of the English speaker’s “April fool’s day” is the Latino *Día de Inocentes*. The English *innocent* retains more of the original Latin significance of “not wicked” than does the Spanish *inocente*, which places more emphasis on the aspect of ignorance.

All this is to say that, while the denotation of a word may be interesting and helpful in understanding the relationship between words, it would be dangerous to assume that the connotation is always equivalent to it. After all, if a husband called his wife a very nice lady, she would not be justified in replying “How dare you call me ignorant!” In the same way, to translate *christos* as anointed is not necessarily justified unless Greek speakers literally thought “smeared with oil” when they used the term.

#### AND THE ANSWER IS...

Which finally brings us to the question, “What *did* Greek speakers think when they used or heard the word *christos*?” Again, the denotation of the word is “to smear or rub with oil or grease,” which is virtually parallel to the denotation of the Aramaic word *messiah*, or the English word *anointed*.

But did the Greeks actually think of “someone smeared with oil” when they heard *Christos*?

The answer to this question can be found by investigating the context in which the word is used. There is no better place to start than the passage that started our quandary in the first place —John chapter one. You will recall that Phillip and Andrew, both former disciples of John the Baptizer, had accepted Jesus’ call to follow Him. Andrew promptly went and told his brother about Jesus, introducing Him as “the

Messiah.” This title, John assures us, means *christos* in the Greek.

Phillip, on the other hand, goes to Nathanael and tells him, in verse 45: “We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Clearly, Andrew is using other words to say the same thing that Phillip did; Moses and the prophets wrote of the Messiah. Unlike John, Nathanael is less than convinced, apparently familiar with Nazareth and its denizens, he responds, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Phillip pragmatically tells him, “Come and see.”

What follows is more interesting for what it does not say than for what it does. Before Nathanael even has a chance to be introduced to Jesus, Jesus salutes him as “an Israelite indeed in whom there is no deceit!” It was an unusual greeting, to say the least. Something strange seems to be going on behind the scenes here, for rather than saying “thanks,” or something similar, Nathanael responds with “How do you know me?” If Jesus were merely being polite or mildly complementary, such a response could be considered arrogant. Kind of like saying, “Yeah, I’m an honest guy, what of it?” Instead, it seems that Jesus is referring to some particular event, rather than to Nathanael’s general character, and Nathanael’s suspicious reply reinforces this view, as does what follows. Jesus says, “Before Phillip called you, when you were under the fig tree,

I saw you.” And here, Nathanael’s response seems completely over the top and out of context—“Teacher, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel.”

I remember seeing a comic book version of this story as a child in Sunday school. It showed Nathanael idyllically lounging under a tree only to be interrupted by Phillip breathlessly running up to him to tell him about Jesus. The problem with this picture is that it misses the point. Clearly, Nathanael is not simply amazed that Jesus has a sort of supernatural telescopic vision and knew his location. He is shocked because Jesus’ answer reveals that He truly *knows* him. While we may never know what really happened to Nathanael under the fig tree, it seems clear that something monumental occurred in his life “under the fig tree”—something that Nathanael fully believed was secret.

While it is pure conjecture, I would like to think that Nathanael had had an opportunity to participate in some scheme for personal or political profit that required deception on his part, and that after much internal debate he finally settled the issue under the fig tree. Or perhaps the fig tree was where he met his potential co-conspirators, and informed them of his decision not to participate. Whatever it was, it is clear that Nathanael was shocked at Jesus’ knowledge, and at Jesus’ commendation of him. Clearly, Jesus Himself realized the profound impact of His revelation to Nathanael,

because when He promised Nathanael that he would see even greater things than this, He did not mention any of the great miracles of His earthly ministry, nor even His own resurrection, but an event so great that we are all still waiting for it.

Regardless of how you feel about the above interpretation of Nathanael's call, and the reason for his explosive confession, it is the actual content of his confession that concerns us here. Nathanael's confession demonstrates his complete reversal from absolute skepticism to absolute acceptance of Phillip's claim to have found the One foretold by Moses and the prophets—the *christos*. And what a confession it is: "Teacher, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel!"

Obviously, when Nathanael thought of the messiah or *christos*, he thought of a king. So, here in John chapter one (the same chapter that first revealed our lack of understanding of the meaning of the word *christos*) we find our first hint of the real-life meaning of that word.

It is only a hint, however, because Nathanael seems to make two different statements in his confession—"You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel!" At this point, we are not prepared to say if he viewed one or the other, or both phrases as being equivalent to *christos*, or if he thought of them as mere attributes or descriptors of him. So, while

we are closer to our answer, we must continue our search.

We need to look a little closer at Nathanael's wonderful confession and its two distinct statements. Is Nathanael confessing that Jesus is two different things, both the Son of God and the King of Israel; or is he simply repeating the same thought and restating it in different words?

For those of us blessed (or crippled) by 2,000 years of theological hindsight, the answer appears obvious: Of course he was making two statements. We know that Jesus is both the Son of God and the King of Israel. Only a heretic or infidel would question these truths.... Again, I ask your indulgence to hear me out. I am not questioning the truth of Jesus' divine sonship, but I am questioning if it is sound hermeneutics to consider Nathanael's confession in John chapter one as substantiating it. Far from being a detour, our consideration of this question will lead us directly to the solution of our original puzzle; just what does *christos* mean?

In Romans 1:1–4, Paul begins one of the most profound theological treatises ever written with what, on close examination, appears to be some rather disturbing words:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. (NIV)

It almost sounds like Paul is saying that Jesus became the Son of God. In fact, as much as it might disturb us, that is exactly what he is saying. A thoughtful person will say “But wait just a minute, before you get to verse four, verse three already describes Him as God’s Son, so how can the Son of God become the Son of God? An excellent question, and I cannot answer it better than Thomas Schreiner does in a devotional included in “Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar,” billed as the most popular first year Greek text used today.

The two stages of salvation history are present here. During his earthly life Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of David, but upon his resurrection he was appointed as the ruling and reigning Messiah. The title “Son of God” in verse 4, then, refers to the messianic Kingship of Jesus, not his deity. Paul is not suggesting that Jesus was adopted as God’s Son upon his resurrection.... The “Son” was appointed by God to be “the Son of God.” In other words, Jesus was already the Son before he was appointed to be the Son of God! The first usage (v.3) of the word “Son,” then, refers to Jesus’ pre-existent divinity that he shared with the Father from all eternity. Jesus’ appointment as “the Son of God” (v.4) refers to his installment as the messianic King at his resurrection.<sup>17</sup>

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17 William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Zondervan, 2003), 270.

Put simply, Schreiner is stating the well-attested fact that “Son of God” is an ancient idiom<sup>18</sup> for divinely appointed ruler.<sup>19</sup> (A thoughtful reader armed with this understanding should not have a difficult time finding other examples of this usage in the New Testament.) With the above understanding, Nathanael’s confession suddenly comes into sharp focus. Nathanael is not making two unrelated statements, the first of which would be strangely anachronistic, given that Phillip had just introduced Jesus to him as the “son of Joseph.” Rather, he speaks as a typical Judean of his day, using Greek words to express his Hebrew mindset, to the extent that we can see in his emotional outburst the hallmark of Hebrew poetry—parallelism. “You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel.” These are not two statements, but one hymn acknowledging the truth that Andrew and Phillip had already realized: Here was the one foretold by Moses and the prophets; the Son of God, the Messiah, the *Christos*—which, being interpreted into English is . . . the KING!

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18 Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998), 80. “The early character of the association between king and sonship is established by the confessional fragment to which Paul makes reference.... The reference to being “designated” to sonship indicates that it is conceived as an office into which one is installed. The royal character of the office is established by the reference to descent from David. There is no contradiction between being descended “from [the seed of] David according to the flesh” and “designated Son of God.”

19 Specifically he says “messianic King” but as we see, this is a grammatically unwarranted redundancy that reveals a lack of understanding of the word messiah.