



CHRISTOPHER EVANS

Christopher Francis Evans

1909–2012

THREE YOUNG MEN—two Anglican, one Methodist—studying Theology at Cambridge at various times in the 1930s were destined, though they did not know it, to become the three most influential British New Testament scholars of their generation. All were to become Fellows of the British Academy. The first was Charles Francis Digby Moule (always known as ‘Charlie’), who read classics at Emmanuel College, but then studied Theology at Ridley Hall in preparation for ordination; he became Lady Margaret’s Professor of Divinity in 1951. Youngest of the three was Charles Kingsley Barrett (known by his friends as ‘Kingsley’), who studied mathematics at Pembroke before switching to Theology and preparing for the Methodist ministry at Wesley House; he spent almost all his teaching career in Durham, where he became Professor of New Testament.¹ In between them, and overlapping with Charlie Moule, was Christopher Francis Evans, who was for a short time Lightfoot Professor at Durham before moving to the University of London, as Professor of New Testament at King’s College.

‘Overlapping with’, and perhaps overshadowed by, Charlie Moule, who had gone up to Cambridge a year before him. In later life Christopher would relate how, as an undergraduate, he had ventured to enter for various university prizes, but would inevitably recognise Charlie’s slight figure at another desk in the examination room, whereupon his heart would

¹Both have been the subject of memoirs in this series: W. Horbury, ‘Charles Francis Digby Moule, 1908–2007’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 161, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, VIII, 281–301; J. D. G. Dunn, ‘Charles Kingsley Barrett, 1917–2011’, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XII, 3–21.

sink, and he would conclude that he had no hope of success—though he did, in fact, win the Jeremie Hellenistic Prize in 1932. Throughout his life Christopher found it incredible that he should be taken seriously as a scholar, and no doubt this experience of believing that there were better scholars in the room contributed to his diffidence. So, too, did the fact that like many other students of his generation, he went straight from university and curacy into teaching, without undertaking ‘research’ for a Ph.D. Even as a professor, he would be diffident about supervising Ph.D. students. After all, he had never taken a Ph.D. himself, so how could he tell them what to do? And how had he come to be elected to a chair, and to have honours heaped upon him? Typical of his modesty was the note he wrote on the cover of the copy of the inaugural lecture delivered in Durham which he gave to the author of this memoir, who happened to lodge in a bed sitting-room in his house: ‘To the real theologian who lives above the study.’² The note was, of course, as generous as it was absurd: the reason that he regarded me as a *real* theologian was because I was engaged in full-time ‘research’. How, he wondered, could *he* dare to pontificate on scholarly matters, when the Germans were so thorough in all their studies, and when he was increasingly surrounded by young British scholars who all needed to undertake postgraduate research if they were to become university teachers? Yet precisely because he did *not* ‘pontificate’, but continued to question all assumptions, it was *he* who was in truth ‘the real theologian’.

I

Christopher was born in Small Heath, Birmingham, the second son of Frank Evans, a businessman, and his wife Beatrice, on 7 November 1909. He attended the famous King Edward’s School, Birmingham, which numbered Cambridge New Testament Professors J. B. Lightfoot and B. F. Westcott among its alumni, and where Charles Dugmore—who later became a fellow professor (in Ecclesiastical History) at King’s College—Robert Leaney—who, like Christopher, wrote a commentary on Luke³—and the future Conservative MP, Enoch Powell, were among his contemporaries. He was a member of the 1st Rugby XV, where he played

²C. F. Evans, *Queen or Cinderella*, inaugural lecture delivered 23 Feb. 1960 (University of Durham: 1960); republished in C. F. Evans, *Explorations in Theology 2* (London, 1977), pp. 84–100.

³A. R. C. Leaney, *The Gospel According to St Luke* (London, 1958).

scrum-half, so setting something of a family tradition, since his son Jonathan also played scrum-half for school and club, and his grandson played scrum-half and captained Manchester University. The tradition is now carried on by his great-grandson Luke, playing scrum-half for his preparatory school. Christopher's love for the game continued in later life, and when in Oxford he was a regular attender of games at the University's grounds at Iffley Road.

As a boy, Christopher came under the influence of Alec Vidler, who was curate at St Aidan's church, Small Heath. In 1929 he went up to Cambridge, having been awarded an exhibition to read classics at Corpus Christi College, with the intention of switching to theology after a year, and it was this initial training in classics that would colour his approach in later years. Cambridge could boast many first-class New Testament scholars at that time: J. M. Creed was Ely Professor, and F. C. Burkitt was Norris-Hulse. Other New Testament teachers included P. Gardner-Smith and W. L. Knox. But by far the greatest influence on Christopher was exercised by Sir Edwin Clement Hoskyns, who was lecturing on the Theology and Ethics of the New Testament (and who was going to have a similar influence on C. K. Barrett, who attended the same series of lectures a few years later). Hoskyns combined fearless examination of the text with deep personal devotion, and made his pupils familiar with the rigorous critical work being done in Germany, which was felt by more timid scholars to be an attack on the Christian faith itself. Hoskyns was also the translator of the immensely influential commentary on Romans by Karl Barth,⁴ and appreciated Barth's engagement with scripture. He introduced his pupils to the idea of 'biblical theology', which was to become prominent in biblical studies in the mid-twentieth century. Christopher had 'the great good fortune', as he described it, to be a pupil of Hoskyns,⁵ and in a public lecture delivered on 22 October 1981, in which he reflected on the work of Hoskyns, he tried to describe the effect that this pre-eminently great teacher had on him: 'any attempt to do so would be inadequate which did not account for the fact that at the end of a supervision one might have to be careful in walking down the stairs because one was feeling rather drunk'.⁶ Christopher's own students might well feel later that this was a good description of their experiences of his own teaching!⁷

⁴E. C. Hoskyns, *The Epistle to the Romans* by Karl Barth, trans. from the 6th edn. (London, 1933).

⁵Evans, *Explorations*, p. vii.

⁶C. F. Evans, 'Crucifixion-Resurrection: some reflections on Sir Edwyn Hoskyns as theologian', *Epworth Review*, 10.1 (1983), pp. 70-6, and 10.2 (1983), pp. 79-86, at p. 84.

⁷Commenting on Christopher's Inaugural Lecture (see above, n. 2), Gordon Wakefield described him as 'a genuine successor to Hoskyns'. See E. C. Hoskyns and F. N. Davey (eds.), with a

In the introduction to a collection of essays published in 1977, Christopher picks out three things, in particular, that he learned from Hoskyns.⁸ The first of these was ‘the importance of the critical method in the study of the New Testament’. Hoskyns’s pupils, he remarks, ‘had their noses rubbed in [the critical method], and were not allowed to talk theology apart from it’. Hoskyns’s confidence in the method ‘as serving to uncover where the principal theological issues were, breathed through the book *The Riddle of the New Testament* which he wrote in conjunction with his ... pupil F. N. Davey’—a book which exercised an enormous influence not only on his Cambridge pupils, but on future generations of students far beyond Cambridge.⁹ For Christopher, the historical-critical method was always the essential starting point for any investigation, as he demonstrated in the section entitled ‘The New Testament in the making’ which he contributed to the volume of *The Cambridge History of the Bible* co-edited by himself.¹⁰

The second insight he learnt from Hoskyns was, he writes, his ‘concern with Christology’—not as ‘a subject in itself and on its own’, but as ‘an aspect of theology and of the doctrine of God’. This concern, he suggests, was in part a reaction to the prevailing ‘liberalism’ of the time, ‘according to which the words and message of Jesus were of primary, and the person of the one who uttered these words of secondary, importance’. For Christopher also, however much he subjected the words of Jesus to scrutiny, it was the person of Jesus himself who was primary. It was a theme that he himself explored in a lecture entitled ‘Christology and Theology’, where he discusses the way in which the Old Testament is appealed to by our New Testament writers. Such appeals are aimed, he writes, ‘at establishing the continuity and identity of Jesus with the agelong purposes of God’.¹¹ In Acts 13, for example, the Old Testament is used ‘to show Jesus as not being a figure in his own right, but as one who is in the closest connection with the purposes of God’.¹² And writing of the central role of

biographical introduction by G. S. Wakefield, *Crucifixion–Resurrection: the Pattern of the Theology and Ethics of the New Testament* (London, 1981), p. 79.

⁸ Evans, *Explorations*, pp. vii–ix.

⁹ Sir Edwyn Hoskyns and N. Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament* (London, 1931). Christopher notes that the book was translated into eighteen languages.

¹⁰ P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible Volume 1* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 232–84. I owe this observation to the Revd Dr R. Parsons, one of his students.

¹¹ C. F. Evans, ‘Christology and Theology’, the Albrecht Stumpff Memorial Lecture delivered at Queen’s College Birmingham in May 1959, and published in Evans, *Explorations*, pp. 101–20, at p. 106.

¹² Evans, *Explorations*, p. 107.

Christology for Paul, he commented: ‘It would . . . be quite inadequate to Paul’s thought to say that as a Christian he had added to a previous satisfactory belief in God a belief in Jesus as the Messiah; rather had belief in Jesus as Messiah brought to light for the first time what belief in God really was, and had made it operative.’¹³

The third insight he attributed to Hoskyns was that although theology was ‘very properly pursued as an academic discipline in the universities, [it] was in the last resort a function of the church, and sooner or later the theologian must show himself responsible to the man and woman in the pew, and if possible to the man and woman in the street’. It was this fundamental answerability of the theologian to the church that was to characterise Christopher’s own approach as a teacher.

In 1932 Christopher graduated with first-class honours and began preparation for ordination at Lincoln Theological College, where he was taught by a team which included Michael Ramsey, future Archbishop of Canterbury. Many years later, he related how he and a friend had consulted Sir Edwyn Hoskyns regarding the choice of a theological college. ‘In your case, Evans,’ Hoskyns had said, ‘I think you would be well advised to consider going to Lincoln. They teach some theology there, and there is a young man named Ramsey who has recently joined the staff: I think you might learn a good deal from him.’ As for his friend, he continued, he had ‘advised [him] to go to Cuddeston [*sic*]. After all Cuddeston [*sic*] is for gentlemen, isn’t it?’¹⁴ Hoskyns’s recommendation of Lincoln proved good advice, and from Ramsey Christopher learned, among other things, about the writings of two very different theologians—F. D. Maurice and P. T. Forsyth—whose work had hitherto been unknown to him.

On Hoskyns’s advice, he also spent several months in Tübingen, where he heard some of Germany’s leading New Testament scholars, and was shocked by the activities of the National Socialist Party. A research stipend enabled him to spend some time at Hawarden, where he worked on St Luke’s Gospel: already, it seems, he was concentrating on the Gospel which was to be the subject of his last and greatest book. He was ordained deacon in 1934, priest in 1935, and from 1934 to 1938 served as a curate at St Barnabas, Southampton. Among those who met and were influenced by this lively young clergyman were Tom Baker (later Principal of Wells Theological College, and subsequently Dean of Worcester) and Dennis

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 112 f.

¹⁴ C. F. Evans, *Humanity, Holiness—and Humour*, The Michael Ramsey Memorial Lecture (Durham, 1995), p. 1.

Nineham (future Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, then Warden of Keble, Oxford, and finally Professor of Theology at Bristol).

In 1938 he returned to Lincoln Theological College as Tutor, and remained there for most of the Second World War, with bombers heading for Germany passing regularly overhead. The Principal at that time was Eric Abbott, later Dean of King's College London (1945–55) before becoming Dean of Westminster, and Eric Mascall (who joined King's as Professor in 1962, in the same year that Christopher himself arrived there) was also on the staff: together, they made a formidable team. During this time he met his future wife, Elna Mary Pasco, whom he married in 1941. He was the first member of staff to be married, and he was required to live out of College, which necessitated a long cycle home at night after compline. Their son, Jonathan, was born in 1943.

After six years of teaching at Lincoln Christopher moved—but not far, since he now took up a post as Chaplain and Lecturer in Theology at the Training College for Teachers in Lincoln. The post was not equal to his capabilities as a scholar, but provided him with the opportunity to enhance his teaching skills and to use his pastoral gifts.

His knowledge of German was put to good use shortly after the war, when he took part in a visit of British churchmen to Germany and was embarrassed to find himself lecturing to some of Germany's prominent theologians. A few years later, in 1951, he was invited to lecture as 'Gastprofessor' at a summer school in Hamburg, where he formed a lasting friendship with his host, Dr Eduard Lohse, who was to become Professor of New Testament at Kiel and then Göttingen, and was later elected Presiding Bishop of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany.

In 1948, Christopher's scholarly gifts were recognised when he was elected Chaplain, Fellow, and Lecturer in Theology at Corpus Christi College, Oxford.¹⁵ Here, instead of teaching all the subjects in the Theology Honours School, as had traditionally been done, he formed a 'teaching circus' with J. R. Porter (later Professor at Exeter University), who was teaching Old Testament at Oriel College, and Dennis Nineham, by now Chaplain at Queen's College, followed by David Jenkins (later Bishop of Durham), who both taught early church doctrine. Undergraduates would spend one or two terms writing weekly essays for one of the three before moving on to the next. One former student describes how Christopher opened her eyes to 'the excitement and value of critical approaches to the Bible', and notes how much she appreciated the personal interest that he

¹⁵He became an Emeritus Fellow of the College in 1977.

took in his pupils.¹⁶ Another, who studied in Oxford in the mid-1950s, recalls the brilliance of his lectures on Luke;¹⁷ he was, it seems, continuing to work on that Gospel. At the same time, however, he was working on St John, editing the commentary left unfinished by R. H. Lightfoot, former Dean Ireland's Professor in Oxford.¹⁸ He also joined with Dennis Nineham in delivering a joint series of lectures on the Synoptic Gospels, fascinating the undergraduates with their different approaches and with the unanswered questions they raised. Among his pupils were John Bowden, who was to become a firm friend and—as editor of the SCM Press—the publisher of his books, and Frederick Borsch, who was later to become Dean and President of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, and who remarked that Christopher had taught him 'the value in gospel research, not only of asking questions but of asking questions about the questions'.¹⁹

But Christopher never forgot that he was also a churchman. In addition to his pastoral work in his college, he served as Proctor in Convocation for the University of Oxford from 1955 to 1958. For some years he was a member of the Church of England Doctrine Commission.²⁰ He was much in demand as a spiritual director and retreat conductor. Like his mentor, Hoskyns, his roots lay in Anglo-Catholic piety.

In January 1959 he moved to Durham as Lightfoot Professor of Divinity and Canon of the Cathedral. He was teaching early church history, which was not his specialism. It is not surprising then, that he was attracted by the invitation to accept one of the new chairs in Theology being created in the University of London, and based in King's College. Having only just arrived in Durham, however, he felt that he could not move in 1961, as requested. As it happened I was still resident in his house, working as a Research Fellow in the University, and so, happily for me, the idea was born that I would fill the gap until Christopher could decently move to London the following year. It is to him, therefore, that I owe the opportunity to begin my teaching career, since at the end of the year I was given a post at King's in my own right, and so began a fruitful period of

¹⁶ Note from the Revd Jean Mayland in *The Church Times*, 14 Sept. 2012.

¹⁷ Miss Margaret Flemington, in personal conversation with the author.

¹⁸ R. H. Lightfoot, *St John's Gospel: a Commentary*, ed. C. F. Evans (London, 1956).

¹⁹ F. H. Borsch, 'Jesus, the wandering preacher?', in M. Hooker and C. Hickling (eds.), *What About the New Testament? Essays in Honour of Christopher Evans* (London, 1975), pp. 45–63, at p. 61.

²⁰ The Commission's report was published as *Christian Believing: the Nature of the Christian Faith and its Expression in Holy Scripture and Creeds* (London, 1976). Christopher contributed an appendix entitled 'The unity and pluriformity of the New Testament' (pp. 43–51).

working with Christopher in teaching New Testament in King's. At first Dennis Nineham did some of the teaching, but then we were joined by Colin Hickling, followed by Sophie Laws, and finally, when I left King's in 1970, the team was completed by Graham Stanton, who eventually succeeded to the chair when Christopher retired. Christopher was always hugely supportive of his younger colleagues, one of whom expresses it well when she recalls his 'humanity, informality and kindness', and remembers with gratitude the concern he had for us all.²¹

Christopher's arrival at King's brought a breath of fresh air to the department there. His predecessor, who retired in 1961, had sadly failed to inspire his pupils. One former student writes of the 'magic' of Christopher's teaching, and describes 'the total transformation' that the new regime 'brought to a moribund New Testament department', saying that he will 'never forget the sheer excitement of Professor Evans's lectures on John . . . Even then, we knew how very fortunate we were, as later years of teaching and ministry have confirmed.'²² They were amazed by the wealth of meaning that he discovered in the text. Dazed undergraduates would emerge from his lectures on the Fourth Gospel, wondering how anyone could take a whole term to deal with the Johannine Prologue, and whether he would ever get to the end of the book; but they came back for more! As Graham Stanton later expressed it, Christopher 'was a master teacher who had the knack of encouraging students to think about the text for themselves'.²³

Christopher and I continued the collaborative form of teaching which he had adopted in Oxford, deliberately adopting different approaches. The resulting weekly Seminars for New Testament specialists 'remain an inspiration' to this day for at least one former member of the group.²⁴ Christopher's contributions to the seminar were characterised by excitement and determination. Sitting on the edge of his seat, he would expound one or other of the New Testament passages we had chosen for in-depth study, introducing the students to critical analysis of the text. One week *he* would lead the discussion, the next it would be my turn—and though he was ever ready to ask questions, he was not necessarily prepared to accept the answers I offered him. 'Rubbish!' he would splutter when he disagreed with my analysis. The students loved to watch us locked in dispute, and *we* certainly enjoyed our shared explorations. Our sessions were not, how-

²¹ Lady Laws, in a private letter to the author.

²² Letter from the Revd Canon Anthony Phillips in *The Church Times*, 14 Sept. 2012.

²³ Endorsement on the back cover of the 2008 edition of C. F. Evans, *St Luke* (London).

²⁴ The Revd Canon Robin Gill in *The Church Times*, 24 Aug. 2012.

ever, designed as entertainment, but rather to serve as demonstrations of the problems involved in any serious engagement with the text. There was always more than one way of approaching the problems, always more than one possible solution answer to any question. One member of the group was Desmond Tutu, who came from a very different background in Africa ‘where there were right answers which you regurgitated as a student’. He was astonished to be invited to think for himself, and was utterly bowled over by this new experience, which he found both ‘exhilarating’ and ‘liberating’. He writes: ‘I cannot erase from my memory the image of [Christopher] puffing away at his pipe whilst listening attentively to the spewings forth of us students.’²⁵

Christopher was rarely seen without his pipe in those days. Another student remembers him with great fondness, and describes how he would walk around his room excitedly while discussing an essay, spilling sparks from his pipe and almost setting fire to the carpet.²⁶ His experience was typical, for Christopher was not only a brilliant lecturer but also a patient supervisor. He would spend hours with the students specialising in New Testament studies, and they speak gratefully of his conscientiousness and care. He was, indeed, primarily a teacher rather than a writer, and as a result progress on his Commentary on Luke was slow, though occasional articles appeared as a result of his work.²⁷ He took a sabbatical in Australia with the purpose of ‘completing’ it, but it was another twenty years before it finally appeared.

In some university departments, concerned as they were to prove that theology was a proper ‘academic’ study, and where any kind of belief was regarded as unscholarly, Christopher would have been lost. In the King’s of the 1960s and 1970s, where more than 90 per cent of the students were preparing for ordination, he was in his element, and in his teaching he demonstrated the relevance of academic study to personal faith—though it was left to his hearers to make the vital connection. As Leslie Houlden expressed it in his review of *Saint Luke*,²⁸ when it was finally published, ‘This commentary . . . will not yield good sermons at the press of a button,

²⁵The Most Revd Desmond Tutu, in a private letter to the author.

²⁶The Revd Dr David Cornick, in personal conversation with the author.

²⁷See, for example, C. F. Evans, ‘Uncomfortable words—V’, *Expository Times*, 81 (1969–70), 228–31 (a study of Luke 16:31); C. F. Evans, ‘Tertullian’s references to Sentius Saturninus and the Lukan census’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, ns 24 (1973), 24–39.

²⁸C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (TPI Commentary, London, 1990; 2nd edn. with preface by Robert Morgan and Michael Wolter, 2008).

but . . . it may prevent bad ones' from being written.²⁹ Christopher himself was acknowledged to be an outstanding preacher.

Christopher's own situation, as scholar and priest, enabled him to sympathise with his research students, who were almost all training for ordination. One of them comments:

That connection between study and ministry, while having the potential to bring many good fruits, carries with it some serious risks, not least that rhetorical or pious sleights of hand might crowd out the rigour of intellectual questioning . . . what is needed is a gentle empathy with the student's ministerial motivation combined with a persistent, though not strident, return to the hard questions—again and again. If I know that, it is because it is what I received from Christopher. Part of the gentle empathy is an awareness that there are things which cannot be known, whose uncertainty will always be part of the theological agenda, but that there are also things which, at least to those who have faith, can be affirmed.

Referring to the many statements in Christopher's own work which lie 'on the boundary between certainty and uncertainty, faith and doubt, affirmation and intellectual inquiry', this former student continues: 'to be supervised by CFE was to be invited to join him there'.³⁰

College students were not the only people to benefit from Christopher's teaching skills. Already in 1948, he had published a small booklet to help study-groups grappling with the Bible.³¹ A series of Lenten addresses on the Lord's Prayer delivered in Durham in 1962 was reproduced in printed form, and became a best seller.³² While at King's, he took part in two series of televised lectures, the first on the Gospels, the second on St Paul.³³ Television lectures in the 1960s were totally unlike those of today, where presenters wander through some exotic landscape, or stand (momentarily) in a building with a tenuous connection with the subject of the lecture. In those days the lecturer was filmed standing behind a lectern, addressing a hall full of students, and the only movement of the camera throughout the allotted thirty minutes was from lecturer to audience and back. It was

²⁹L. Houlden, Review of *Saint Luke*, *Theology*, 93 (1990), 317.

³⁰The Rt Revd Dr Peter Selby, in a tribute given at a Choral Evensong celebrating the life of Christopher Evans held at King's College London 15 Jan. 2013.

³¹C. F. Evans, *The Bible* (London, 1948).

³²C. F. Evans, *The Lord's Prayer* (London, 1963).

³³The second of these, 'His Writing', a television lecture given in 1966, was published in C. F. Evans, M. Hooker and J. C. O'Neill, *The Apostle Paul* (London, 1966), pp. 7–20. Christopher wrote almost nothing on Paul, the main exception being a lecture on 'Romans 12.1–2: the true worship', given at the 5th Ecumenical Pauline Colloquium held in Rome in 1974, and published in Lorenzo De Lorenzi (ed.), *Dimensions de la Vie Chrétienne (Rm 12–13)* (Rome, Série Monographique de "Benedictina" 4, 1979), pp. 7–33.

necessary to engage one's audience—and Christopher did so—as he evidently did once again in some lectures on St Mark's Gospel delivered in 1968 in the University of Kent.³⁴

Christopher was a regular contributor to the series of weekly lectures in Theology provided at King's College London for 'non-theological' students, studying for the Associateship of King's College (AKC). Not surprisingly, he was asked to give similar lectures elsewhere, and some of these have been preserved in a volume of essays which appeared in the SCM series entitled *Explorations in Theology*. Four lectures on 'The Passion of Christ' printed here were given at Bryn Mawr College, Philadelphia, in March 1975,³⁵ and three on 'The Christian' were delivered in the Queen's University of Belfast in 1972.³⁶

One of the issues that engaged him throughout his teaching career was what he termed 'The Use of Scripture'—the title he gave to a group of papers republished in *Explorations*.³⁷ All of them reflect the understanding of the role of the theologian which he attributed to Hoskyns, that 'sooner or later the theologian must show himself responsible to the man and woman in the pew, and if possible to the man and woman in the street'.³⁸ The first, 'Hermeneutics',³⁹ arose out of his experiences as a member of a group set up by the World Council of Churches to consider the relevance and meaning of the Bible today, of which he wrote: 'The writer's membership of the British group was not only for him a great privilege and pleasure but also one of the most creative experiences of his life.'⁴⁰ The second essay is the inaugural lecture he gave in Durham in 1960, which considered the limitations of the historical method in the pursuit of theology. The Christian gospel, he wrote, must be investigated by historical means, since it 'is contained in an event which is genuinely historical ... On the other hand however, it escapes a purely historical description, and the historical method does not suffice to penetrate to its

³⁴ C. F. Evans, *The Beginning of the Gospel ...: Four Lectures on St Mark's Gospel* (London, 1968).

³⁵ Evans, *Explorations*, pp. 3–66.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 141–82.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 69–137.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

³⁹ A paper read to The London Society for the Study of Religion in 1974. First published in *Epworth Review*, 2.1 (1975), 81–93.

⁴⁰ Evans, *Review*, 2.1, p. 84; Evans, *Explorations*, pp. 72 f. On the experiences of this group, see also E. Flesseman-Van Leer, 'Dear Christopher', in M. Hooker and C. Hickling (eds.), *What About the New Testament? Essays in Honour of Christopher Evans* (London, 1975), pp. 234–42.

heart.⁴¹ Two lectures—one on ‘Christology and Theology’,⁴² the other on ‘Parable and Dogma’,⁴³ in which he explored some of the ways in which later theological debates and pronouncements had distorted the significance of the earliest material—complete this section of the book.

King’s recognised Christopher’s contribution to teaching and to the Faculty by electing him to a Fellowship of the College in 1970. Recognition came, too, from the University of Southampton, which awarded him an honorary D.Litt. in 1977. On his retirement, in 1977, he moved, with his wife Elna, to Cuddesdon, Oxford, a couple of hundred yards from the theological college there, a recent amalgamation of Ripon and Cuddesdon Colleges. He began a happy association with the College, where he taught some students, while continuing his work on a Commentary on Luke which he had begun many years before. Elna died in 1980, and he took many years to come to terms with her loss. After teaching for a month at Bishop’s College, Calcutta in 1982, he returned to Durham as Visiting Fellow at Trevelyan College in 1982–3, but it was two terms spent in Glasgow in 1986 and 1987 as the Alexander Robertson Lecturer that restored him to his old form—though he nearly lost his life there when he was taken seriously ill while addressing a group of students; he was saved by the quick thinking of some medical students who were present.⁴⁴ In Glasgow he lectured on St John’s Gospel and conducted seminars on St Luke’s Gospel, on which he was still at work. Students found him an ‘absolutely inspirational teacher who amazed them because he was still puzzling over things that puzzled them. He did not always understand their Scottish accents, but they loved him dearly!’⁴⁵ The University of Glasgow awarded him an honorary DD in 1987.

Back in Cuddesdon, he continued to work on St Luke, and the resulting commentary was finally published in 1990.⁴⁶ His election as Fellow of the British Academy in the following year brought him much pleasure. He continued his close connection with the theological college—a relationship which proved to be of mutual advantage. He learned to cook, attending evening classes in Oxford, and would cook his own Christmas cakes and serve dishes such as Beef Wellington and Pavlova at dinner parties.

⁴¹ Evans, *Queen or Cinderella*, p. 21; Evans, *Explorations*, p. 99.

⁴² See above, n. 11.

⁴³ The Ethel M. Wood lecture: C. F. Evans, *Parable and Dogma* (London, 1977), delivered in the University of London in 1976, and reprinted in Evans, *Explorations*, pp. 121–37.

⁴⁴ The Revd Dr Anthony Bash, in a private letter to the author.

⁴⁵ Professor John Barclay, in a private letter to the author.

⁴⁶ Evans, *Saint Luke*.

All his visitors were familiar with the terrifying Cona machine powered by methylated spirit which looked as if it would be at home in a chemistry laboratory, in which he brewed coffee.

During these years Christopher's eyesight deteriorated to the point that he could no longer read, except with the aid of a special magnifying machine. He disposed of his theological books—but retained his precious run of *Wisden*! In 2008, increasing infirmity led him to move to the Foundation of the Lady Katharine Leveson at Temple Balsall, in the West Midlands, where he was well cared for, while contributing richly to the life of the community. He retained his razor-sharp inquiring mind to the last. A former research student describes how, when arranging a day and time when they could meet for a meal, Christopher said that he would write down the date with 'ISAAC' next to it, explaining that 'ISAAC' meant 'If Still Alive And Compos'.⁴⁷ No one else had any fear that he would *not* be 'compos'! His eyesight gone, he preached his last sermon—lasting twenty minutes!—without notes on Advent Sunday in 2011. After a final short illness, he died on 30 July 2012, aged 102.

There was of course far more to Christopher than the scholar and churchman. One of the things that endeared him to others was that he *enjoyed* life—and his enjoyment was infectious. He enjoyed good food and wine and conversation, and loved going to good restaurants and to the theatre. He took pleasure in throwing parties for his students, who remember them still with great pleasure, and he lit up any gathering by his presence. It is true that there were bleak years for him after Elna's death, and at the end of his life he found the limitations of old age frustrating, but he never lost his immense capacity for friendship; he enjoyed meeting people and found them interesting. He would greet one with an impish grin and a twinkle in his eye. A large number of family members and friends gathered to celebrate his hundredth birthday—another occasion on which Christopher spoke at length without notes. One of the last photographs taken of him shows him with his friend Leslie Houlden at Temple Balsall, each with a glass in hand. For many of his friends, their abiding memory of him is of a shared meal. One describes how he and two other friends were taken out to lunch by Christopher when the latter was 100; he writes: 'Christopher was the life and soul of the party, mixing gossip from the 1920s with a sharp command of contemporary ecclesiastical gossip, and cracking many a joke about both.'⁴⁸ He loved watching cricket, and had a

⁴⁷ The Rt Revd Peter Selby, see above, n. 30.

⁴⁸ The Revd Professor Diarmaid McCulloch, Kt, in a private letter to the author.

secret passion for all-in wrestling, but the hobby he listed in *Who's Who* was fly-fishing, a sport which demanded great patience both from him and from Elna. At the end of his life, he took great pleasure in the achievements of his two grandsons—Martin, a naval chaplain, and David—and in his three great-grandchildren—Isabelle, Luke, and Alexandra, who was just 100 years younger than himself.

II

It was not until Christopher was working in Oxford that his first serious published work appeared—a fact which may well have contributed to his diffidence in regarding himself as a ‘true scholar’. The first piece to appear, in 1954, was an essay in the prestigious *Journal of Theological Studies* entitled ‘I will go before you into Galilee’.⁴⁹ In this he argued that Mark 14:28 was to be understood as a promise by Jesus that, following his resurrection, he would lead his disciples back into Galilee, and that this symbolised the beginning of the Gentile mission. Tentatively, Christopher invited his readers to choose between this interpretation and one that was popular at the time, which understood the words as a reference to Jesus’s return at the Parousia. At the end of the article he touches on the problem of the abrupt ending of Mark’s Gospel, and comments that it is not alone, since ‘The end of any Christian book is a problem, for eloquent perorations are reserved either for those who believe optimistically that they have the answers, or for those who believe cynically that there are no answers to have; perorations are debarred to those for whom God’s act is the last word.’ It was an appropriate declaration for a scholar who, in his future work, never made perorations, and who always worked with the conviction that the text on which he was commenting was ‘God’s act’.

In the following year, he contributed an article to a volume written in honour of an Oxford New Testament scholar, R. H. Lightfoot, formerly Dean Ireland’s Professor of Exegesis at Oxford.⁵⁰ In this, Christopher turned to Luke’s Gospel, and looked at the enigma of the long central section (9:51–18:14), a passage which has no parallel in Mark’s Gospel (almost certainly used as a framework by Luke), and which purports to tell the story of Jesus’s journey from the Mount of Transfiguration to

⁴⁹ *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS 5 (1954), 3–18.

⁵⁰ C. F. Evans, ‘The central section of St. Luke’s Gospel’, in D. E. Nineham (ed.), *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 37–53.

Jerusalem. This passage had long proved a problem, since it seemed to possess no clear structure, but rather appeared to be an amorphous collection of diverse material with little reference to either time or place. Christopher found clues to the passage in the opening verses, where the language reflects expressions used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. As elsewhere in the Gospel, we may suppose that Luke is pointing us towards the Jewish scriptures. Especially significant was the word ‘assumption’ in 9:51, a word used in apocryphal literature to refer to Moses’s ascension to heaven. Christopher argued that Luke’s purpose here was to present Jesus as ‘the prophet like Moses’ promised in Deuteronomy 18:18, and spelt out a series of parallels between Luke 10:1–18:14 and Deuteronomy. For good measure, he pointed to parallels—or rather contrasts—between Luke 9:52–62 and stories in 1–2 Kings about Elijah, and suggested that both Moses and Elijah, the two figures who feature in the story of the Transfiguration, are important to Luke as witnesses to Jesus.

This scintillating thesis had a mixed reception. For some commentators it was clearly too *avant garde*, and they simply ignored it. Some accepted it with enthusiasm,⁵¹ while others argued vigorously against it, protesting that the parallels were not convincing, and that there were other passages in Deuteronomy that offered better parallels, though not in the sequence presented in that book.⁵² The evidence, it was argued, suggests only that Deuteronomy may have been drawn upon from time to time. It is true that his critics were right in arguing that some of the suggested links were far less persuasive than others, but there are sufficient parallels to support the belief that there must be some truth in Christopher’s suggestion. He himself seems to have lost his initial enthusiasm for the thesis as he originally presented it, however, since he refers to it only tentatively in his Commentary on Luke, published nearly forty years later.⁵³ Although he again sets out the links between Deuteronomy and Luke, he makes far less of their significance and of the importance of Moses and Elijah. Nevertheless, in the scholarly world of today, where critics are far less concerned with depicting Luke as an ‘historian’ whose primary interest

⁵¹ See, for example, J. Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke’s Gospel* (London, 1976), pp. 67 f., 138–64. See also D. Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet: the Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative* (Minneapolis, MN, 1989).

⁵² For example, C. L. Blomberg, ‘Midrash, Chiasmus, and the outline of Luke’s central section’, in R. T. France and D. Wenham (eds.), *Gospel Perspectives: Studies in Midrash and Historiography*, III (Sheffield, 1983), pp. 217–61.

⁵³ Evans, *Saint Luke*, pp. 34–6, 435.

was accuracy, and regard him rather as someone who wished to bring out the theological implications of his story, the theory offers what may well be the best explanation of Luke's intention in composing this section of his Gospel.

The following year saw the publication of another article in the *Journal of Theological Studies*,⁵⁴ in which Christopher once again raised questions about a commonly held interpretation. This time he focused on the view, initially propounded by C. H. Dodd⁵⁵ and by the 1950s widely regarded as an established conclusion, that the speeches in the first part of Acts, together with certain 'pre-Pauline fragments' in Paul's letters, reflected the early *kerygma*—that is, the preaching—of the early Jerusalem church. Although it was recognised that Luke stood in the tradition of ancient historiography, and could therefore be expected to compose speeches which he considered appropriate to his characters and to the occasion, Dodd had argued that the faithfulness with which he used his sources in composing his first volume (Luke's Gospel) suggested that he would adopt the same method used in the Gospel in writing Acts. These passages were therefore regarded as supremely important in tracing the development of Christian belief. Moreover, these speeches—which were said to 'sound primitive'—contained aramaisms, suggesting that they preserved very early material, while those attributed to Paul appeared to echo Pauline language.

Christopher argued that a comparison of Luke's method in writing Acts with the one he adopted in composing his Gospel is invalid, since Luke would have felt himself far freer in composing his second volume than in his first, where he was dealing with words attributed to Jesus himself, not the words of apostles. Moreover, the material in the Gospel—compilations of sayings—is very different from the speeches in Acts; to describe Luke as composing speeches in the tradition of Greek history tradition is insufficient, however, since this tradition 'was open to a wide variety in practice'.⁵⁶ Luke was a 'biblical' writer who was strongly influenced by the Septuagint. Moreover, he was a dramatic historian, 'gripped by the conception of Christianity as a great event projecting itself into history', who aimed 'to interpret it not to his fellow Christians, and not . . . to the Jews, but to the subjects of the Empire itself'.⁵⁷ The speeches,

⁵⁴ C. F. Evans, 'The Kerygma', *Journal of Theological Studies*, ns 7 (1956), 25–41.

⁵⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London, 1936).

⁵⁶ Evans, 'The Kerygma', p. 29.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Christopher argued, were composed to demonstrate the theme of the book, which is clearly stated in 1:8: ‘Ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.’ He shows how this theme is set out and developed in all these speeches, and how it explains why Acts ends as it does, with Paul in Rome, preaching the Gospel without hindrance in spite of Jewish opposition. It is because the speeches were composed to fit this overarching theme that they sometimes seem inappropriate for the occasions on which they are said to have been delivered. Luke’s purpose, to show how the apostles bore witness to the Gospel ‘to the uttermost parts of the world’, also explains his strange repetitions—in the early speeches in Jerusalem, in the accounts of the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10–11), and in the threefold recounting of Paul’s conversion, with their growing emphasis on Paul’s commission to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9, 22 and 26). He concludes by suggesting that the very elements in the speeches which seem to us to be ‘primitive’ may in fact be characteristic of the preaching of Luke’s own day.

This essay built on the work of Martin Dibelius, already renowned as a form critic of the Gospels, whose study of the speeches in Acts had recently been published,⁵⁸ and who was concerned with the literary forms of the material, rather than with positing fragmentary ‘sources’ which might or might not embody historical tradition. Christopher was not content, however, to label them all as ‘speeches’, but argued that each had a particular purpose. It is no accident that his approach to Acts coincided with the development of ‘redaction criticism’ of the Gospels; the evangelists were now being regarded as authors with a purpose rather than gatherers-up of fragments. Like Christopher’s study of the central section of Luke’s Gospel, this essay on Acts portrayed Luke as a man with a mind of his own and a clear purpose. He returned to the theme of the speeches in an essay contributed to a *Festschrift* published in 1970, once again building on the work of Dibelius.⁵⁹

The relationship between form and content is once again the theme of his last major public lecture, published some twenty years later, though on this occasion his subject was the relationship of form and content in the

⁵⁸ M. Dibelius, ‘Die Reden der Apostelgeschichte und die antike Geschichtsschreibung’, *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, philosophisch-historische Klasse* (Heidelberg, 1949); republished in *Aufsätze zur Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1951), and subsequently translated in M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. H. Greeven (London, 1956), pp. 138–91.

⁵⁹ C. F. Evans, ‘“Speeches” in Acts’, in A. Descamps and R. P. André de Halleux (eds.), *Mélanges Bêda Rigaux* (Gembloux, 1970), pp. 287–302.

Epistle to the Hebrews.⁶⁰ Most of Christopher's published work was based on lectures given on various occasions. The same is true of his most substantial study of one theme (apart from the Luke commentary), a volume exploring the idea of Resurrection.⁶¹ The original three lectures have, however, been expanded into 180 somewhat dense pages, which led one reviewer to remark that 'some of [the book] is heavy going'.⁶² Its value lies in what the same reviewer describes as 'its scrupulously careful and scholarly analysis of what the New Testament says about resurrection, and its refusal to let the reader get away with facile interpretation'.⁶³ Christopher begins by showing the scant evidence for the idea of resurrection at the time of Jesus, goes on to a detailed examination of the New Testament tradition regarding Jesus's resurrection, and concludes with a discussion of the meaning of resurrection and its relation to exaltation, which he considers to be the more inclusive idea. A few years later he returned to the theme in an essay entitled 'Resurrection in the New Testament and now', which undertook the even more difficult task of relating the biblical doctrine to the modern world.⁶⁴

His greatest achievement, however, was undoubtedly his Commentary on Luke, which was eventually published in 1990, when he was 80. It had originally been commissioned to replace a somewhat thin volume in the series of Penguin commentaries. Christopher's volume, of some 933 pages, certainly cannot be described as 'thin'! Unlike many modern commentaries, which become clogged up with references to secondary literature, however, this one succeeds in distilling the insights gained from a lifetime of studying the views of others. Not surprisingly, given Christopher's training, the commentary 'continues the English tradition of classicists becoming theologians rather than Judaica providing the essential background for New Testament scholars . . . but among New Testament writers Luke is the one most naturally read with a classicist's spectacles'.⁶⁵ Intended for clergy and students, it offers reliable comments, and is notable for its sound judgement. Above all, it offers us the author's own

⁶⁰ C. F. Evans, *The Theology of Rhetoric: the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London, 1988).

⁶¹ C. F. Evans, *Resurrection and the New Testament* (Studies in Biblical Theology, 2:12, London, 1970).

⁶² C. F. D. Moule, review in *Theology*, 73 (1970), 457–9, at p. 459.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 457.

⁶⁴ C. F. Evans, *Is Holy Scripture Christian? And Other Questions* (London, 1971), pp. 64–77. An earlier attempt to relate biblical faith to the modern world was made in an essay entitled 'The faith of the New Testament', in D. M. MacKinnon (ed.), *Christian Faith and Communist Faith* (London, 1953), pp. 117–45.

⁶⁵ R. Morgan and M. Wolter, preface to the 2008 edn. of Evans, *St Luke*, pp. xvi–xvii.

understanding of Luke, his background, and his Gospel. The reviewers were united in their praise; one described it as ‘a welcome combination of vigour and freedom from dogmatism’, and welcomed the fact that it ‘ducks none of the problems’.⁶⁶ When the book was republished in 2008, another wrote:

C. F. Evans’ Commentary on Luke is extraordinarily rich, reflecting a lifetime’s close engagement with the Gospel. The Commentary opens up not only the world of Jesus but also that of the author of the text as he sought to interpret the traditions about Jesus to his own setting. Pastors, interested lay people and students will find challenging questions that direct them afresh to the text, while more experienced students and scholars will find more new insights and suggestions than in many a much-longer Commentary.⁶⁷

Throughout his life, Christopher continually posed similar ‘challenging questions’. In a lecture provocatively entitled ‘Is “Holy Scripture” Christian?’, he raised the fundamental question as to whether the notion of a ‘holy book’ was compatible with Christianity.⁶⁸ It was no accident that a phrase he often used was ‘the curse of the canon’. Here, he reminds us that the final choice of books for inclusion in the canon had been made on the belief that they were ‘apostolic’—a belief which he described as ‘fantastic’—and argues that ‘it was of the essence of the Christian gospel in its earliest period that it abolished the category of the holy except as applied to God himself (and perhaps to the community which was in living touch with him)’.⁶⁹ The lecture was included in a book with the same title,⁷⁰ in which he posed other questions that some may have found disturbing: ‘Should the New Testament be taught to Children?’ raised the eyebrows of some readers. ‘Is “the Jesus of History” Important?’ sounded dangerously Bultmannian to others. As for ‘Is the New Testament Church a Model?’, that challenged the prevailing orthodoxy of the day by declaring that ‘one of the results of critical analysis of . . . the New Testament [is] that it puts a question mark against the assumption that there is *a* or *the* New Testament view of anything’.⁷¹ For Christopher, the task of the New Testament scholar was to ‘put a question mark’ against *all* assumptions—and to subject any answers offered in response to those question marks to further scrutiny.

⁶⁶ L. Houlden, review in *Theology*, 93 (1990), 317.

⁶⁷ Judith Lieu, endorsement on the back cover of the 2008 edn. of Evans, *St Luke*.

⁶⁸ Published in Evans, *Is Holy Scripture Christian?*, pp. 21–36.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷⁰ Evans, *Is Holy Scripture Christian?*

⁷¹ Evans, *Is Holy Scripture Christian?*, p. 79.

It was for this reason that the editors of a volume of essays presented to him on his sixty-fifth birthday chose a question—*What about the New Testament?*—as the title for that book.⁷² To those who knew him, its appropriateness was obvious. What *about* the New Testament? What are we to do with this strange collection of documents? What makes them special? In what *ways* are they special? How do we probe the questions the New Testament raises regarding history and literature, theology and authority? It was no accident that all the essays in that volume raised questions—many reflected in the titles the authors gave to their pieces. As his friends, we knew that we could honour him best by asking questions, however radical they might seem, rather than by producing a set of polished answers. When the time came to present the book to him, one of his oldest friends, Dennis Nineham explained, in his after-dinner speech, that his friends had decided to recognise his birthday by presenting him with a book. Christopher commented afterwards that he had sat listening to these words, wondering which book we had decided to buy for him! It did not occur to him that we might have written the book ourselves. He could not believe that he deserved such an accolade.

Throughout his long life, Christopher Evans neither sought nor expected praise or honour, though he cherished them when they came his way, for he possessed the great gift of serendipity, enjoying to the full what fortune brought him. Above all, he embodied the characteristics he attributed to his hero, Michael Ramsey—humanity, holiness, and humour.⁷³

MORNA D. HOOKER

University of Cambridge

Note. I am grateful to the Revd Jonathan and Mrs Susan Evans and to the Revd Robert Morgan for assistance in composing this *Memoir*.

⁷² Hooker and Hickling, *What about the New Testament?*

⁷³ Evans, *Humanity, Holiness—and Humour*.