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Christ Will Come Again - Part 1

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott uses Scripture to dismantle the objections often raised against the return of Jesus. John shows why Christ's return is the only event Christ predicted that is yet to be fulfilled.

Transcript

[Music] So friends, whenever at Holy Communion we raise our voices together and cry. Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. That is what we are affirming.

We're not uttering a triplet as inane trivialities.

[Music] Welcome to The Bible for Today with John Stott. Perhaps no one raised the standard of biblical teaching as did Stot.

It was Jesus Christ that he made preeminent in all his teaching. Whenever he preached his home church of all souls, Lang and place, it was packed. During John Stot's centenary we are bringing you some of his finest Bible teaching from almost 60 years of ministry.

[Music] As Christians there are fundamental truths we know and love. We know that Christ died for our sin. We know that God raised him from the dead.

But are we as confident that Christ will come again? I may need just to say that this series is based on the three great acclamations in which the congregation join in one of our Church of England communion services. When together we say Christ has died, Christ has risen and Christ will come again. I would like to step back a few moments at the beginning this evening and look at these three acclamations together.

All three represent fantastic Christian claims. Don't let's underestimate their epoch making importance. They strain our human credulity to the limit.

All three are essential expressions of an authentic Christian faith. The say Christ has died means not simply that he was narrow to a cross and left there to expire. After all there

were tens of thousands of people in those days who were crucified like Jesus.

They were executed paying the supreme penalty during the Roman occupation of Palestine. So we're not just referring to the fact of his crucifixion when we say that Christ has died. Rather we are saying that he died spiritually as well as physically.

During those hours on the cross he endured the horrors of hell in the God for second darkness. And that the death he died was the penalty, the just penalty of our sins and that because he died we may be forgiven. That is what we are affirming when we say that Christ has died.

To say Christ is risen means not simply that he's still alive and that his personality and his influence continue to attract and fascinate. To eliminate human beings and that they have survived his death we mean something much more than that. We mean that God resurrected and changed the body of Jesus in such a way as to defeat death and to overthrow its tyranny.

And it's such a way as to constitute Jesus of Nazareth as the second Adam. The head of the new and the redeemed human race and the beginning of God's new creation. And now tonight we come to Christ we'll come again.

We're not simply affirming that he who disappeared is one day going to reappear. We are affirming in that acclamation that history is not a random succession of meaningless events. We are affirming what we have just been singing that God is working his purpose out and that he's working to a climax.

And the climax will take place when Jesus Christ comes again. His coming will terminate the old order which was already beginning to pass away and will introduce a new order which will include the resurrection of the dead and the regeneration of the universe. That is what we're looking forward to when Christ comes again.

So friends whenever at Holy Communion we raise our voices together and cry. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. That is what we are affirming.

We're not uttering a triplet of inane trivialities. We're not just repeating three little parrot cries or mindless slogans. We're not even referring to three historical events, two past and one to come.

We are affirming our confidence in the three decisive victories of Almighty God. His victory of a sin and guilt and condemnation through the death of Jesus is victory of a death itself through the resurrection of Jesus. And his victory of a despair, alienation and meaninglessness through promised return of Jesus.

So these things that we are affirming have tremendous significance, theological and not just historical significance. Where with that introduction I'd like to ask you to turn in the

Bible in front of you to the passage that was read to us just now. And I read again some 1st Thessalonians chapter 4 beginning at verse 13.

1st Thessalonians 4th 13, we don't want you to be ignorant. Sisters and brothers, ignorance is a great bane in the Christian life. We so often go astray because of our ignorance.

It makes the anti-intellectualism that is so common in the church today a matter of deep grief to all of us or should do. Paul again and again says, "I want you to know, I don't want you to be ignorant. And if only we could grow in knowledge and understanding we should be delivered from many of the problems that plague us." I don't want you to be ignorant then.

Sisters and brothers concerning those who are asleep, that is those who've died, so that you may not grieve like others who do not have hope. Grieving is not forbidden. What is forbidden is hopeless grieving.

Of course we need to grieve at the loss of a loved one. If Jesus wept at the grave side of his friend Lazarus, we may weep as well. It isn't weeping that is forbidden here.

It's grieving like those that have no hope. Then he goes on, "Since we believe to kind of mini-creed, it may be even a snippet of a very early creed." You notice what he says, that at least three clauses in the creed. We believe that Jesus died and raised again.

Even so, the new international version goes on. We believe, secondly, that through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Those who've died in Christ will be brought by God with Christ when he returns on that great day.

Then the third part of the creed is the beginning of verse 15. We believe, and now we declare to you by the word of the Lord that we who may be alive when he comes will not precede those who have died. But will be caught up to meet him and them, and so we shall be together with the Lord and so on.

Now, I want to suggest to you that the passage read to us a little fuller than I've just repeated just now. Throws light on at least three of the major questions that people ask when they are thinking about the second coming of Jesus Christ. The first one that I cannot omit is the fact of his coming or whether he is going to come at all.

Because the second coming of Jesus as an event, future event of history is widely disbelieved and even denied within the church let alone outside it today. There are unafraid Psalm even leaders in the church or would be leaders in the church who don't hesitate to say that Jesus just to be sure he did teach that he was going to come again. He also taught that he would come again in the lifetime of his contemporaries, but they add he was mistaken.

And since he didn't come in their lifetime, we certainly know that he was mistaken as regards the time of his coming, so presumably he was mistaken about the fact. You hear people talking like that, it's not uncommon in the church so wide is the skepticism and unbelief in the church today. Now, how we respond to that kind of talk will depend on our evaluation of Jesus.

It will depend on what we think or who we think he was and the degree of reliability that we therefore credit to his teaching. Now, I can only speak for myself because I'm persuaded that he is God-made man, the word-made flesh, and that everything he said was true and inherent. I want to say three or four quick things in response to the kind of skepticism that I have mentioned.

First, it seems to me if you believe in Jesus, it is much more likely that those who declare Jesus mistaken are themselves mistaken than that he was. That at least is a presupposition if you believe in Jesus as the truth. Secondly, or be, Jesus acknowledged on one important occasion that he himself didn't know the date of his own return.

In fact, it never did, it didn't accept the father. So if he didn't know the date, it is antecedently improbable that he should have predicted when it would happen if he said he didn't know it. Thirdly or see, each of the texts which people quote as showing that Jesus was expecting his return during the lifetime of his contemporaries, each of these texts is capable of a perfectly natural and alternative explanation.

For example, when he said there is some standing here who will not taste death until they see the son of man coming in his glory or the kingdom coming in power, the evangelists evidently understood that he was referring to the transfiguration, but that is what they immediately described and the transfiguration was a revelation of the son of man in his glory. Or again, when he said you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the son of man comes, since he had just declared that he was sending them ahead of him and that he would follow them in due course, it seems natural to say that what he meant was that he would catch them up and overtake them before they had completed their mission in the villages or cities of Israel. And again, when he said this generation will not pass away until all these things have been fulfilled, it would be natural to understand that all these things in the context of Mark 13, Matthew 24, Luke 21 refers to the event surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem, of which he has been teaching, and not to that final day of whose date he said nobody knew.

So it is not difficult to find the natural alternative explanation of those difficult texts. D. Jesus' great emphasis in his teaching about the future is on the surprise nature of his coming. People weren't ready for it, he said, when he comes, many were be taken by surprise, but he added there is no need for them to be taken by surprise if they watch.

He kept saying, "Bividulant, because you don't know when the son of man will come." But once again the command to be vigilant because you don't know the coming would

be hard to reconcile with the idea that he didn't know when he was coming and predicted it as taking place in the lifetime of his hearers. Then one other thing, and that is even the words, "I am coming soon," which are attributed to him several times in the book of Revelation, are not an inexplicable statement because God's idea of what is soon may very well be different from ours. What I believe he means in saying, "I am coming soon," is that between the ascension of Jesus and the return of Jesus there is nothing on the eschatological calendar of God.

There is no other event that is to take place. And the inter-adventual period between his first coming and disappearance and his second coming or reappearance is a gap that is filled with the mission of the church to take the gospel. There is no other event that we are waiting for except the coming of Christ.

So he's coming soon. There's nothing else to come before he returns. Well, I'd hope that that briefly as I've gone into it may be a help to some who've been swayed by the skepticism of many leaders today that Jesus was mistaken.

On what ground then do we believe? If we do believe that Jesus is coming again. Well, very simply we believe because he said so. And because we are persuaded that his word is reliable.

As you read in Hebrews 10, "He who promised is faithful to his promises." Or again as we read here in verse 15, you lie to glance down at your text chapter 4 verse 15. We declare, "By the word of the Lord," that, etc. Now some people think that this word of the Lord is a word spoken by the heavenly Jesus through some prophet, maybe, or through an apostle or maybe through Paul himself.

The great bishop, J.B. Lightfoot, one of the greatest New Testament exegetes in the past century, believed that what Paul was saying when he said, "We declare, by the word of the Lord," is that he was claiming to speak the word of the Lord himself. Speaking again personally, I think it is more likely that by the word of the Lord he means not a word of the heavenly Lord Jesus, but a word of the historical Lord Jesus. That this is a word that has not been recorded in the gospels except in a very general way, but is a remembered though unrecorded word of his.

Rather like in Acts 20 verse 35, when speaking to the Ephesian elders, he said, "Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said it is more blessed to give than to receive." That little epigram is not to be found anywhere in the four gospels. It is an unknown word of the Lord. It is an unrecorded word of the Lord, but remembered nonetheless.

So whatever Paul meant by the word of the Lord, he is claiming the authority of Jesus for what he goes on to say about his second coming. Jesus did certainly announce on several occasions not only that he would die and rise again, but that one day he would

come again in the clouds of heaven in power and in great glory in order to reign and to judge. So his announcement of his coming is tantamount to a promise, and it seems to be more compatible with humble Christian discipleship that we should believe the promise of Jesus than that we should doubt or deny it.

That's all I have time for on the fact of his coming or whether it will take place. I move on secondly to the manner of his coming or how it will take place. And I want to suggest if I may that we should be wise and balanced here and that we should avoid two opposite and extreme positions.

The first is the position of people I think I have to describe as the debunkers. That is to say the people who dismiss the teaching of Jesus and of his apostles, and we remember that the New Testament itself warns us that there will be scoffers on the last day who deny that he is coming again. Now this exercise in debunking takes a variety of forms.

There are some students of the New Testament who say that when Jesus predicted that he was going to come back and that they would see him, he was rarely referring to his resurrection appearances. When he did come back and they did see him. Or maybe to the diapentecost when he came in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Or maybe to the destruction of Jerusalem in 8070 when he came in judgment upon the ancient people of Israel. Others say no, Jesus was simply using mythological language and we must demythologize his teaching. That is to say, if he spoke of a dissent from heaven, the Lord himself would descend from heaven.

All he rarely meant was that he comes to meet us in an existential encounter every day. And it is a reference they say not to some future event, but to a spiritual reality as Christ confronts us with himself in challenge to our homage today. Well, all I can say is that none of these attempted reconstructions does justice to the recorded teaching of Jesus or his apostles.

The motivation of the debunkers appears to be their desire to get rid of what they regard as an embarrassing concept in Christianity that he is actually going to come again personally and visibly and so on, to which I will come in a moment. So all these attempts to reconstruct or demythologize his coming won't do if we want to be true to the teaching of our Lord Jesus. Now from the debunkers we go to the opposite extreme which is the embroiderous.

And these are people who try to decorate the teaching of Jesus with their own fanciful speculations. They try to work out a very detailed program. They even date dates in defiance of the prohibition of Jesus to do so.

And they even identify persons and events in the newspapers and confidently declare that they are a fulfillment of this or that particular prophecy. I think the most notorious

example is those who tried all down Christian history to pinpoint the identity of the Antichrist. There have been many many candidates for this dishonor.

I think we begin with the persecuting Roman emperors who may have been some kind of expression of the spirit of Antichrist. And then came the vandals who invaded the Roman Empire and sacked Rome. Muhammad was a candidate in the 6th century and then the corrupt popes of the Middle Ages.

In the 13th century the emperor Frederick II and Pope Gregory IX found great satisfaction in calling each other the Antichrist. In the 16th century Luther said it was the Pope and the Pope returned the compliment and said no, it's Luther. And more recent candidates for the Antichrist have been Napoleon Bonaparte, Napoleon III, Kaiser Wilhelm, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and of course today, Sudden Hussein.

Now how do we respond to this kind of exploded exegesis as it has been called? And then we have to leave John Stott until the same time next week when he'll conclude the message on Christ's return. This message is based on the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians and if you'd like to know John Stott's thought on every verse in Thessalonians then you'll be interested in our book recommendation for this week. It's called The Message of Thessalonians and is part of the Bible Speaks Today commentary series.

You'll find details on the homepage of our website premierchristianradio.com/JohnStott. The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world. Today Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stott who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this and other ministries John Stott founded go to premier.org.uk/JohnStott. Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

[Music]

(buzzing)