

OpenTheo

Encounter With Jesus - Part 1

April 11, 2021



The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott explains that Christianity is not us being a slave to a belief or ethical system but the freedom that can only be found through faith and trust in Christ.

Transcript

[Music] It is possible to be orthodox in your intellectual belief, to be upright in your moral character, to be punctillious in your religious observances and still not be a Christian and still have missed the essence. I know because I was like that myself for many years.

[Music] Welcome to The Bible for Today with John Stot.

There are few evangelicals who have ever influenced the global church in the 20th century as much as John Stott and it was Betty Graham who called him the most respected clergyman in the world. Always remaining faithful to the word of God and unsuade by current trends, the person of Christ blazed from the German he preached. Whilst John Stot impacted the church across the world, his home church was always all souls laying in place on the heart of London's West End.

And it's from 600 sermons he preached there that were marking his centenary with some of his most powerful messages. Christianity for many people is often taken for granted to the extent that we may not even ask the question, what does it mean to be a Christian? After all, if you're born into a Christian family, you must be a Christian, we say. And isn't Christianity simply believing in a creed or a code of ethics or living by the golden rule? As we'll see from today's message, John Stot takes a very different view based on what the Bible teaches us in Philippians chapter 3. What is the essence of Christianity? What in its very simplest possible terms does it mean to be a Christian? What is the irreducible minimum of being a Christian without which one could not call oneself a Christian? Do you know it's astonishing that after 1900 years we should still need to ask that question? Surely by now people would all know the answer.

But there's so much confusion, so much misunderstanding. Christianity after all is a big

thing, it has many aspects, and many people can't see the wood for the trees. What is the essence of Christianity? Let me begin by clearing the ground, I need to be negative before I can be positive, and I want to tell you what Christianity is not.

Primarily Christianity is not a creed. Many people think that Christianity is primarily an intellectual system, and that a Christian is somebody who can rehearse and recite the Apostles' Creed from A to Z without crossing their fingers. Without any mental reservations, I believe in God the Father Almighty Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ His Only Son, our Lord and in the Holy Spirit.

Surely they say, "If I can go through the creed and express my faith in the Trinity, that must make me a Christian." Not necessarily. And I think it was John Wesley who first said that devil is the chief proof of that. He was probably referring to a phrase that comes in the letter of James in the New Testament when he says that even the demons believe and shudder.

There isn't a demon in hell who isn't orthodox in his Christian belief. They know that God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are true, but their orthodox say, does not deliver. Does not deliver them from hell.

They are still demons. They were, if you're trusting in orthodox belief, you might find yourself in demonic company. Christianity is not a creed.

Mind you, Christianity has a creed. Christian belief is a very important part of Christianity, and if we are Christians, it's extremely important that we think out what we believe and why we believe it, and we can have some reason to give an account of the faith and hope that the illness and so on, but although Christianity has a system of beliefs, it isn't one. Secondly, Christianity is not a code of ethics.

Many people think it is. They think that Christianity is primarily an ethical system. And that if Christianity is somebody who strives to live according to the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and particularly the golden rule that comes in the Sermon on the Mount, namely as you wish that people would behave to you, so behave to them, this is the law and the prophets, and that if we believe according to those high moral standards, surely we would have a right to call ourselves a Christian.

But no, not necessarily at all. Christianity has a code. It has an ethical teaching.

It has higher moral standards than any other religion in the world. And Christian behavior is an very important part of being a Christian. If we are Christians, and of course it is important for us to behave, to live our lives in public, in private, at home, at business, as Jesus Christ would have us behave.

But all that Christianity has an ethic. It is not an ethic. And it is perfectly possible to live a good life, to take the golden rule as your model, and still not be a Christian at all.

There are many agnostics, many humanists who think that the golden rule is a good idea, but that doesn't make them Christian. Thirdly, Christianity is not a cult. It's not a religious cult.

Many people think it is. They think that Christianity is primarily not now an intellectual, not now an ethical, but a ceremonial system. And they imagine that a Christian is somebody who's been baptized and confirmed and goes to church, sings hymns, recites, prayers, reads the Bible, etc.

Goes through all the gamut of religious observances. Surely that's a Christian, they say. But no.

Christianity has religious practices. Christian worship, like Christian belief and Christian behavior, is a very important aspect to being a Christian. If we are Christians, we will join with other Christians as we have done tonight to worship God and so on.

Baptism was instituted by Jesus. The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion was instituted by Jesus. They are very important.

These aspects of Christian worship. But you can go through all that gamut of religious observances and still have missed the bus. There would not be a Christian at all.

The Pharisees in our Lord's Day were a case in point. Very religious. But it's possible to be religious without being Christian.

So in essence, Christianity has neither accreed nor occurred nor occult. In essence, Christianity is neither an intellectual system nor an ethical system nor a ceremonial system. And no is it all three put together.

It is possible, although it's very rare because it's somewhat difficult, it is possible to be orthodox in your intellectual belief, to be upright in your moral character, to be punctillious in your religious observances and still not be a Christian. And still have missed the essence. I know because I was like that myself for many years.

But I want to give you another example, a historical example which in my reading is the most notable and striking example. And that's the experience of John Wesley, before his meteoric career began as an evangelist to Britain, as it were. I wonder if you know about him, some of you do, of course.

But you know, before his conversion, before his encounter with Jesus, he was all those three things I mentioned. He and his brother Charles and George Whitfield and Morgan and the number of others were all adoxed with university, junior and senior members of the university. And they founded a religious society that came to be known as the Holy Club.

At least that was one of the more polite titles by which those young men were known. They were actually called the Bible Moths. And of course later they came to be called the Methodists.

Now to begin with, they were orthodox in belief. They believed not only the apostles' creed, but the Nicene Creed and Athanasius' creed, and every one of the 39 articles of the Church of England, which I'm sure you will agree, guarantees their orthodox say. They were quite orthodox in their belief.

Secondly, they were very upright in conduct. In fact, they were full of good works. They spent three or four evenings a week in each other's company, partly to read the classics, partly to read books of divinity and the Bible.

And in order to revise their weekly timetable, so that every minute of every hour of every day had its fixed and determined duty. They were so conscientious they didn't want to waste any time. Then they began to visit and even preach in two of the prisons of Oxford, the Oxford Castle, and the Bacarda, which was the Dattas prison.

Then they founded a school in one of the slums of Oxford, and they paid the teacher and clothed the children out of their own pockets, full of good works. Thirdly, they were very religious. They went to Holy Communion every week.

They first did on Wednesdays and Fridays. They kept the canonical eyes of prayer. They observed Saturdays, the Sabbath as well as Sunday.

They studied patristics, the early church fathers, and especially the austere discipline of totalian of North Africa. So you see, they were orthodox in belief. They were upright in conduct.

They were conscientious in religious observances. But in his later life, looking back on Thursdays, John Wesley said he reckons he wasn't a Christian at all at that time. In the notable letter that he wrote to his mother, he said, "If may have been the religion of slaves." But it certainly wasn't the religion of sons or daughters.

He was quoting a verse of Paul's in his letter to the Galatians, in which he speaks of the difference of slavery and sonship. The difference between being a slave or being a child of God. One is bondage and the other is liberty.

And he hadn't yet discovered the liberty with which Christ can make us free. Well, I'll come back to Wesley later, but I wanted to use him as a historical example of what Christianity is not. But it's time I was positive.

Christianity is not a system of any kind, primarily. It is a person. Christianity is Christ.

The center of Christianity is the figure of Jesus Christ, son of God, son of man, Lord of

heaven and Lord of earth. The one who came from the heights of highest heaven, not only to earth, but plunging even to hell, went on the cross. He died for us and bore our sin and guilt in his own innocent and divine human person on the cross.

He is the center of Christianity, not just believes about him, but in encounter with him. Christian is somebody who knows Christ, follows Christ, believes in Christ, is devoted to Christ. And of course, once Jesus Christ is the center of our lives, then our Christian belief and our Christian behavior and our Christian worship and every other aspect of Christianity fit into place.

But so many people put the card before the horse. Christianity is Christ. It is Christ, the center of your life.

Do you know him? Listen then to my text. Some of you may like to look it up. It doesn't matter if you don't, but if you'd like to, your Bible is there in front of you.

And in the New Testament, Paul is writing to the Philippians, Philippians 3-7 onwards, and as I read, just notice the references to Jesus Christ. Philippians 3-7 on page 186, but whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

For his sake, I've suffered the loss of everything. Count these things as refuse or rubbish in order that I may gain Christ. And be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own based on law, but the righteousness that is through faith in Christ.

The righteousness from God that depends on faith that I may know him Christ, and the part of his resurrection and share his sufferings. They made like him in his death, and attend the resurrection from the dead, and so on. I want to make Christ Jesus my own as he's made me his own, and so on.

It's full of Christ. All makes an obsession with Jesus Christ. That's the essence of Christianity.

Let me break it down. One, to be a Christian in essence is to know Christ as your friend. What a friend we have in Jesus.

Could you say that? Or do you think it's a pious platitude? It isn't. It's a reality. What a friend we have in Jesus.

To know him as our friend, Paul says he speaks of the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord, the overwhelming gain of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. Now he is not talking about an intellectual knowledge. There are primarily but a personal knowledge, and there is a difference between the intellectual knowledge and the personal knowledge between knowing about somebody and knowing somebody.

To take an obvious example in contemporary life, we all are learning a great deal these days about Margaret Thatcher. We know something about her humble origins, something about her political career, something about her achievements when she was ministering. When she was minister of education, something about her family life, something about her forefinger that she's always pointing at somebody or something, something about her distinctive achievements in Tokyo and more recently in Lusaka.

And some people seem to know her so well, they call her Maggie. I know a lot about Maggie, but I don't know her. I've seen her in the House of Commons.

I've seen her on television. I've never met her. She certainly doesn't know who I am.

We've never met one another. Is it like that between you and Jesus Christ? Of course you know about him. You know the name of his mother, his foster father? You know the circumstances of his birth? You know the village in which he was born and the other village in which he was brought up? You know about his baptism.

You know that he was a carpenter by trade. You know that he had twelve apostles and some of what he taught, and he died on a cross as a felon, crucified by the Romans and the Jews rejected him and it's said he rose, etc. You know all this about Jesus, but do you know him? Is there any sense in which Jesus Christ is a personal reality in your life so that you could not conceive of living your life without Christ? That's what Paul claims.

He speaks of the overwhelming gain of knowing Christ. Indeed he draws up almost what you might call a profit and loss account. He speaks a bit in a way that will appeal to any business, men or women who are here tonight.

And he puts in one column everything he can think of in his past life that at one time where gain and profit to him. His genetic inheritance to use an expression we would use today is upbringing, is Jewish upbringing, is education as a Pharisee, is righteousness. According to the Lord the fact that he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, he spoke Hebrew as well as Greek and so on all his cultural upbringing and education, he wrote them all down on one side.

And then on the other side he put the overwhelming gain of knowing Jesus Christ. And then he made a careful calculation. And he said in comparison with the overwhelming gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, everything is loss, gain, loss, profit and loss.

Now when you hear Paul said that you may say he's off his rocker, he's crazy. But no, it was a sober calculation. It was a sober statement by the apostle Paul written when he was in prison.

That you reckon in comparison with this gain, this profit, this privilege of knowing Christ as a living reality, everything, everything was rubbish. Good you say that? Even faltering, even hesitantly? It's a very searching test as to whether we are Christians or not. Do you

a Christian is to know Christ as your friend too? Do you a Christian is to trust Christ as your savior? Notice how Paul goes on.

He says in order that I make gain Christ and be found in him. Not having a righteousness of my own, I'm reading verse 9. Not having a righteousness of my own that is based on law, that is on obedience to the moral law, but a righteousness that comes from God. It's a gift, it's not my achievement, it's his gift, it comes from God through faith in Christ.

So Christ is not only the object of my knowledge, he's the object of my faith, I don't any know him, I trust him, I don't any know him as my friend, I trust him as my savior. Now if some of you've never heard that verse before, it probably confuses you, you wonder what on earth it means, and I'd like to take a minute or two to try and unravel and explain it. It's all about righteousness.

We all know that God is righteous. If there is a God at all, of course he's righteous. If he went righteous, he wouldn't be God.

So if there is a God, he's righteous. Perfectly righteous. Absolutely holy.

He sends the reason, therefore, that if you are I, or ever to enter into the presence of God, in this life or in the next, we must be righteous too. Because what agreement has righteousness with unrighteousness. Okay? Then if we have to be righteous in order to enter into the righteous presence of God, where are we going to get this righteousness from? That will qualify us to enter into the righteous presence of God.

Only two answers have ever been given to that question. The first is, I will go about to establish my own righteousness. That's what Wesley and his friends try to do in Oxford.

I'm going to become religious and go to church, and I'm going to do good works in the community and engage in philanthropy. And I'm going to try and weave around myself a tissue of righteousness and hope that I can make myself righteous enough for God to accept me. Well, you can't.

The Bible says that even our righteousness is in the sight of a righteous God or like filthy rags. We can never make ourselves righteous enough for this all righteous God, never. Never is ever succeeded in doing it.

The way into the presence of God is not by my own righteousness. It isn't righteous enough. It isn't good enough.

So what's the alternative? Well, the alternative is what Paul talks about here. He tells us that Jesus Christ came into the world. God, the son, the eternal son, made flesh, became a human being, lived a righteous life in character and conduct and never did any sin, in mind or word or deed.

He lived a perfectly righteous life in a world of unrighteousness. Then he went to the cross and on the cross while he was dying, in some mysterious way we don't fully understand, he took upon himself our unrighteousness. He died for our sins.

So that if we come to Jesus Christ and put our trust in him, a wonderful exchange takes place. He takes away our unrighteousness and clothes us with his righteousness. You've been listening to the first part of a message by John Stott on what it means to be a Christian.

And John will conclude his sermon at the same time next week. If you found his message helpful, you can take it further by reading a book that John Stott wrote on this subject called *Focus on Christ*, published by Langham Publishing Resources. There are more details on our website where you can also hear hundreds of messages by John.

Just visit 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)