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Jesus Christ: Tried, Tested And Proven - Part 1

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott investigates how the church went from being a handful of people that Jesus gathered around Him to the world-wide phenomenum it is today.

Transcript

[Music] Whether you who are listening to me tonight have a rather wobbly faith or a faith that is growing or a faith that is strong, I think that God intends us to understand from this passage of Scripture how faith grows and what the foundations are upon which faith can rest secure.

[Music] Welcome to The Bible for Today with John Stott. The 20th century gave us a number of great evangelical Bible teachers and for many John Stott stood above them all.

Perhaps no one raised the standard of biblical teaching as did Stot. When a TV reporter once asked him, "You've had a brilliant academic career at First of Cambridge, rector at 29, chaplain to the Queen." "What's your ambition now?" John replied, "To be more like Jesus." 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 and people even sat on the stairs.

During John Stott's centenary, we are bringing you some of His finest Bible teaching from almost 60 years of ministry.

[Music] The Christian church needs no introduction and can be described as a worldwide phenomenon. There is often reference made to the early church as recorded in the New Testament.

And the growth of the early church is well documented with its origin, of course, being Jesus Christ. But it's important to know how and when the church went from Jesus Christ to its embryo state of a few dozen followers. Well, that's our study for today and you'll find it helpful to have your Bible open to the Gospel of John chapter 1. The Christian

church to which I imagine most, if not all of us here belong, is a truly wonderful phenomenon.

There's who profess to believe in Jesus and to follow Him number about a quarter of the total population of the world. And the faith of Christ crucified His penetrated now into virtually every country and every culture. And tonight we're going to see how this wonderful worldwide movement began.

We're going to see how Jesus, at the very threshold of His public ministry, began to gather around Him the tiny nucleus of His new community. I'd like you, if you will, to open the Bible at the second reading for tonight, which is the passage set for our study. It's the first chapter of the Gospel of John and in the New Testament section you'll find it's on page 88.

In this passage John tells the story of the very first two converts of Jesus who transferred their allegiance from John the Baptist to Jesus Christ. The first of the two has become world famous. We know Him as Simon Peter or St. Peter, the leading apostle.

The other is remained virtually unknown. His name was Nathaniel. Some people think that his other name was Bartholomew and that he was one of the twelve apostles.

Others think no, he was just an unknown disciple who more or less fades out of the picture and is only mentioned once again. So one is well known, one is unknown, but two, the two first followers of Jesus, or two of the first converts. And all that they were different, both of them were introduced by Jesus, to Jesus by somebody else.

Simon Peter was introduced to him by Andrew, his brother. Nathaniel was introduced to Jesus by Philip, a Galilean friend of his. What John seems to emphasize in the passage is not just the fact that these were the first disciples of Jesus, but how they came to believe.

And we're going to investigate in particular the process by which their faith first budded and then blossomed. And I think in hope and pray that it will be a very instructive study for our end Christian faith and our end Christian witness. Mind you, and I'm anxious to say this at the beginning, people become Christians in very different ways.

The story where studying tonight makes that plain. Andrew was converted, not this one, but the first one. Andrew was converted by the public preaching of John the Baptist.

Simon and Nathaniel were converted by the private testimony of a friend or relative. Philip was directly accosted by Jesus, who found him and said, "Follow me." Apparently, without any human intermediary, either public or private. So people come to Jesus in a very wide variety of ways.

Nevertheless, in both the chief episodes that John the fourth evangelist tells us in this

passage, that is the conversion of Simon Peter and the conversion of Nathaniel, certain clear stages are discernible. What I'm going to call either stepping stones to faith, or I think probably better foundations for faith. And whether you who are listening to it tonight have a rather wobbly faith, or a faith that is growing, or a faith that is strong, I think that God intends us to understand from this passage of Scripture how faith grows, and what the foundations are upon which faith can rest secure.

Well, the first foundation for faith I'm going to call testimony. And as I develop the theme, I think you'll see that it is in fact the biblical testimony, which is the first foundation for faith. The story begins with John the Baptist.

I'm not going to read it all to you. It was read by Alan Ritchie earlier on in the service. But John the Baptist, well, last Sunday Michael was telling us of John's wonderful testimony to Jesus, how he pointed away from himself to Jesus Christ and said, "Look, there is the Lamb of God, the Son of God, the Baptizer with the Holy Spirit." And he was pointing all the time to Jesus.

In this paragraph, John the Baptist is exercising the very same unselfish ministry. Let's look at the text. Verse 35.

The next day, John, that's John the Baptist, was standing with two of his disciples. They went to disciples of Jesus. They were disciples of the Baptist.

And John looked at Jesus as he walked, and he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." Then John, on to verse 37, the two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. They had been following John the Baptist, but now as a result of the Baptist's testimony, they began to follow Jesus. Please notice very carefully the verbs in that passage.

John saw Jesus and said, "Look, the Lamb of God," and the disciples heard John and followed Jesus. So John spoke because of what he had seen, and they believed because of what they had heard. This is a characteristic theme of the whole of the fourth gospel, the gospel of John.

People, he tells us again and again, people have to hear in order that they may believe. And testimony, that is what they hear when people testify to Jesus, is an adequate foundation for faith. Faith is reasonable if the testimony is credible.

The outstanding example John gives in the gospel is not actually at the beginning, in the first chapter, but at the end and it's Thomas. One, two, you don't need to turn to it, but I want to remind you quickly of the story. It illustrates the principle admirably.

The ten apostles, that is the twelve minus Judas and Thomas, came to Thomas absent on the first Easter day and said to him, "Thomas, we have seen the Lord." Just like John the Baptist, you see, they spoke because of what they had seen. They'd seen Jesus, so they bore witness to Jesus. They gave Thomas the first hand testimony of eyewitnesses.

Sir, Thomas ought to have believed on their testimony. He had no excuse for not believing. But he refused to believe.

He insisted that he got to see the wounds and feel the wounds in the hands on the side of Jesus, and only then he would believe. Now, the risen Lord condescended to his unbelief. And gave him the evidence he asked for, but in condescending to his belief he rebuked it.

Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you've seen? Blessed are those who have not seen, but have believed." Now, Jesus is not saying there that we should believe without any evidence. What he is saying is that the testimony of eyewitnesses is evidence enough. The tenet said to Thomas, "We've seen the Lord," said he should have believed on their testimony.

It's very important to understand the nature of faith. I think I've quoted before that famous American cynic, H. L. Menken. He's dead now.

He was a literary critic, and is often known as the sage of Baltimore in Maryland. Anyway, he once defined - he said, "Faith may be defined briefly as an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable." Well, it's clever, but it's inaccurate. It is not the meaning of faith.

Faith is not a leap in the dark. It's not screwing yourself up to believe something you jolly well know isn't true. Faith is not a synonym for credulity or for superstition.

Faith is a reasoning trust. And reasonable faith rests on credible testimony. Now, for us today, the credible witness that we need for a reasonable faith is found in the Scriptures.

Because it is there in the Scriptures, particularly in the New Testament, that the testimony of the eyewitnesses of Jesus has been recorded for us. The earliest disciples followed Jesus we've just seen because they heard the testimony of John the Baptist. Well, there's nobody exactly equivalent to John the Baptist who is alive today because there is no living eyewitness of the historic Christ.

So what we have been given in the New Testament, and particularly in the Gospels, is precisely the written testimony of the apostolic eyewitnesses. And that's what they claim. Take John himself.

He begins his first letter, that which was from the beginning, which we have seen with our eyes, which we've heard with our ears, which we've handled with our hands, we proclaim to you. This life was manifested in Jesus, and we've seen it, and we've heard, we've handled, and we are proclaiming to you from our own eyewitness experience. He says the same at the end of the Gospel here in chapter 20 verse 31.

He says these signs of Jesus that we saw with our own eyes are written here in order that

you may believe as a result of our testimony to Jesus and what Jesus said and did. So faith you see as a response today to the written testimony of the apostolic eyewitnesses. I am saying that we mustn't forget the Old Testament.

The Old Testament you know is also testimony to Jesus. Jesus said the Scriptures bear witness to me, and he was referring there to the Old Testament. So did you notice in the lesson? Look at verse 45.

Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the law, and of whom the prophets wrote Jesus of Nazareth." John the Baptist spoke of him. Moses and the prophets wrote of him. So in fact, God has given us a double testimony to Jesus in the Scriptures of the old end of the New Testament.

And we can never dispense with this biblical testimony to Jesus Christ. Of course we Christians can speak to others out of our own living testimony to Jesus, our own experience of him. But listen, our testimony to Jesus, my testimony to Jesus tonight, is secondary.

The primary testimony is the biblical testimony because it is the witness of the apostles who saw the historic Jesus with their own eyes. Once we get heard of this, that the primary testimony is of the apostolic eyewitness, is now written in the New Testament, we will realize at once that the single most effective thing any of us could ever do to persuade unbelievers to believe is to get them to read the New Testament. So it's a single most effective thing we can do.

It's far more effective even than our own testimony. Of course we have to back it up with our own testimony, but get them to read the New Testament, get them to expose themselves to the testimony of the first followers of Jesus who saw him with their own eyes and listened to him with their own ears, touched him with their own hands. That's why all of us ought to have several copies, maybe of the good news for modern man, the today's English version on our book shows, so that we can give a copy to our friends or lend a copy, get them to read the New Testament.

Faith depends on testimony, biblical testimony. Now that brings me to the second foundation for faith. I move from testimony to experience.

From biblical testimony in the first century to personal experience in the 20th century. We've already seen that the two disciples of John the Baptist, Andrew was one, the other is named, but maybe John the beloved disciple, the writer of the gospel. Anyway, these two follow Jesus because they heard the testimony of John the Baptist.

Then as they started following Jesus, Jesus turned around and said to them, "What are you doing? What do you want?" So they said, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" And Jesus said, "Come and see." In other words, vital as it was for them to listen to John the

Baptist's testimony, they couldn't rely entirely on his say. They had to come and see for themselves. And it seems in verse 39 that they spent a whole day in the company of Jesus, the one to whom John the Baptist had sent them.

So now they had an opportunity to know Jesus first hand for themselves. And as a result of this experience of Jesus, Andrew was able to go to his brother Simon, verse 41, and say, "We have found the Messiah." We've seen him with our own eyes. And all they probably, he blurted out without really knowing what he was saying.

And probably the content that he gave to the word "Messiah" was pretty minimal because we know that it was some years later that he came to understand the Messiah's ship of Jesus. Yet nevertheless he did blurted out. We found the Messiah.

He felt sure that Jesus was the one long promised in the Old Testament. Now what Andrew said to Simon Peter, Philip was able to say it in a thaniel, verse 45, "We have found the Messiah." "We found the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote." When the thaniel retorted scornfully, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Probably out of petty jealousy because he lived in another Galilean village, Kana of Galilee, only a few miles away from Nazareth. And there was a petty rivalry between the Galilean villages.

So he said, "Can anything good come out of that?" A sordid village of Nazareth. Philip used the same words as Jesus had used to the others and said, "Come and see." "Come and see." Now I can't think that it's accidental that twice in this passage, John records the invitation to come and see. Or that twice in this passage, the words of personal testimony are used, "We have found the Messiah." Because they went to see.

And having gone to see, they found, because he who seeks does find, according to the promise of Scripture. Now this sequence still recurs again and again in our own experience today. First comes the biblical testimony, backed up, no doubt by our own testimony, then follows personal experience, the coming and the seeing for ourselves, and then the confender defamation is possible.

We have found the one to whom the biblical writers bear witness. We have found the one whom we have come to see for ourselves. So we can't bear witness to Jesus till we've found him, and we can't find him till we come and see for ourselves.

Some years ago, and good many years ago, now about 20, 25, I think, it was my privilege here at all cells or in the other church of St. Peter's to teach the children in what they're used to be called the children's church. Now remember one year I taught them or tried to teach them from the gospel of John. We'd spent the whole year on the gospel of John.

And because they were very intelligent children, we set them a written exam at the end. And having asked them about 25 academic questions, we asked them a final personal

one which went like this. It was based on the passage here.

Andrew brought Simon to Jesus. Philip brought Nathaniel to Jesus. Who have you brought to Jesus? One little girl whose name was Gillie and was only 10 years old, wrote down in her answer, "I've brought myself to Jesus." She was quite right.

She couldn't have brought anybody else until she'd first brought herself, until she'd come to see, or to turn from a child of 10 to the wisdom of an archbishop of Canterbury. You know the great words of William Temple? It is futile saying to people, "Go to the cross." We've got to be able to say, "Come to the cross." There are only two voices that can issue that invitation. One is the voice of the sinless Redeemer with which we cannot speak, and the other is the voice of the forgiven sinner who knows himself forgiven.

And that is our part. Biblical testimony and personal experience combined. John Stott has been sharing us how we can be a witness for Christ, when we have found him for ourselves.

And John will conclude this message at the same time next week. What the first disciples saw in Jesus was that he was the incomparable Christ, and that's also the title of one of John Stott's many books that you'll benefit from reading. Details of this and also videos of John Stott preaching can be found by going to our website, crameerchristenradio.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 bookworlds to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this at other ministries, John Stott found it, go to crameer.org.uk/JohnStott. Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

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(buzzing)