

# OpenTheo

## Jesus's Vision for His Church

December 19, 2021



### **The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier**

John Stott sits in the upper room with Christ and hears Him pray for the truth of the church, the holiness of the church, the mission of the church and the unity of the church.

### **Transcript**

The contemporary church, as you know as well as I do, is extremely unsure of itself and often falls very far short of its calling. So we need to recover Christ's vision as to what He wants His Church to be like. Welcome to The Bible for Today with John Stot.

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, laying in 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. We are coming towards the end of John Stot's centenary as we have been marking 100 years since his birth. Together we've listened to a man who committed his whole life to preaching and teaching the Word of God because he himself committed his life to listening to what God was saying to him.

During the year we've heard a small selection of messages from a lifetime of preaching. John Stot is now an old man and today we join him in the upper room. As together we set at the feet of Jesus to hear Christ's vision for His Church.

I'd be grateful if you turn to your Bible and open it. We'll be referring to this passage. We need to keep the Bible open on our lap if we may.

John 17 is without doubt one of the profoundest chapters in the whole Bible. It contains Christ's prayer for His Church which expresses His vision for His Church. Whole books have been written to expound this chapter.

Thomas Manton, for example, a well-known Puritan at one time, Oliver Cromwell's chaplain preached a course of 45 sermons on John 17. While Marcus Rainesford, who is

an Irish clergyman at the end of the 19th century and occupied the pulpit of St. John's Belgrade Square and was a friend of D. L. Moody, he preached a course of 41 sermons. Both series of sermons were published.

Both books ran to more than 450 pages. So what can we hope to learn in less than half an hour? There are depths in this chapter which we shall never plumb. And all we can do, I think, is to paddle in the shallows.

Nevertheless, we must persevere because if the upper room discourse, John 13 to 17, is the temple of Scripture, John 17 is the holy of holies. In it, we are introduced to the heart and the mind of Jesus Christ Himself. We are permitted to eavesdrop as the sun communes with the Father.

We need to take off our shoes because this is holy ground. Now, in the first five verses of the chapter which we are not really going to look at, Jesus prays for Himself and that He might be glorified on the cross. But in the rest of John 17, He prays not for Himself but for us and for all His followers in every age and in every place.

And before He prays for us, He describes us. There isn't time to go into these details. But His description of us, you may like to know, is that we are a unique people who know the Father, who belong to the Son and who live in the world.

We live in the world, but we know the Father and we belong to the Son. That's how He describes us. So what does He pray? Well, it's urgent that we should press ahead with our question because the contemporary church, as you know as well as I do, is extremely unsure of itself and often falls very far short of its calling.

So we need to recover Christ's vision as to what He wants His church to be like. Essentially, I may just mention this, He prays that God will keep us, the unique people He has already determined that we are. That is that we belong to Christ.

We know the Father, we live in the world, keep them, He says, what they are. But now, after that introduction, He elaborates this and envisages a church which has four major characteristics. And I think if we can concentrate on these four, and if we can grasp the four of them in balance with one another, we will have a real understanding of what kind of community Christ wants His church to be.

So here is number one. Jesus prays for the truth of the church. Look at verse 11, second part.

The second part of verse 11 is rendered by different scholars in different ways. The difference is only concerned with a very simple little preposition, the Greek preposition N. What does it mean? Well, our new international version is a prayer that God will protect us by the power of His name which He's given us. But I don't think that's right.

The revised standard version says, keep them not by the power of, but keep them in your name which you have given us. Keep them, that is to say, in the revelation of your being which you have given us. It's a prayer that His church will remain true to the revelation that God has given to us in Christ.

Verse 12, "While I was with them in the world, I kept them." Not again by that name, but I kept them in that name. "Now, Father, keep them in your name as I have done while I've been on earth." Now, your notice, weren't you, because it's very important that the very first concern that Jesus has for His church is that it will remain loyal to revealed truth. And the truth would be the basis of our unity.

I say it's very important because it is this principle which lies at the heart of the current crisis in the Anglican Communion. The question is, do we preserve our unity even at the expense of truth? Or do we preserve the truth even at the expense of our unity? John 17 seems to give us a clear answer to these questions that although we should seek both truth and unity, they're both important, yet truth must be the foundation on which our unity rests. So that's the first thing.

Jesus prays for the truth of the church, that it may be loyal to His revealed truth always. Now, secondly, Jesus prays for the holiness of the church. Verse 15, "My prayer for them, my disciples, is not Father that you will take them out of the world.

It is rather that you will keep them from the evil one." And the reason for this prayer for our holiness is that we do not belong to the world. We live in it, we have our responsibilities in it, but it is not our home. So He prays that the Father will sanctify us by the truth.

Verse 17, "Since the truth is the foundation of our holiness as well as of our unity." Now friends, all down church history, the church is oscillated between two inappropriate extremes. The first is the extreme of withdrawal from the world. And the second is the extreme of conformity to the world.

But both extremes, the extreme of escapism and the extreme of conformism, both are equally forbidden to the followers of Jesus Christ. Our calling is rather to stay in the world, to live in the world, not to try to escape from it, to stay in it while at the same time not conforming to its values and its standards. Jesus prays for the holiness of the church.

Now thirdly, Jesus prays for the mission of the church. I think you see that in verse 18, Jesus speaking to His Father says, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." On their mission, of course, is implied. And it's remarkable that those who live in the world still need to be sent into it, because it is possible to live in the world without accepting the mission on which we are sent.

So the church's holiness must never impede the church's mission, where to go into the world in the name of Jesus Christ. So Jesus saw His church as a missionary community, and He made His mission the model of ours. One person who has expressed this, I think, very clearly is Michael Ramsey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury.

Listen to this. He says, "We state and commend the faith," that is, we evangelize, we go out in our mission, we state and commend the faith in so far, "as we go out and put ourselves inside the doubts of the doubt, inside the questions of the questioner, and inside the loneliness of those who have lost the way." So all authentic mission is incarnational mission. It involves entering other people's worlds into their doubts, their questions, their loneliness, and so on.

So far then, we've considered the Jesus praise for the truth of the church, the holiness of the church, the mission of the church, and now fourthly, he prays to the unity of the church. John 17 is best known, of course, for its prayer for unity, but often people talk about unity without considering what kind of unity Jesus is talking about. So let's consider that.

Jesus' prophetic eyes are now peering into the future, he's looking beyond the age in which he was living into future ages, and he sees generation after generation of followers who would come to believe in him through the truth, including us, because we too have come to know the truth through the teaching of the apostle, through their word. So what kind of a unity is it for which he prays? It has two aspects that I would like to invite you to consider. A, the first unity for which he prays is our unity with the apostles.

Verse 20, "I don't pray for these alone," that is the apostles who were gathered around him in the upper room. "I don't pray for these alone, I pray also for those who will come to believe through their word," that is all successive believers. Verse 21, "I pray not for these only, but also for those that all of them may be one." So that all of them means these and those together, that is the apostles and later ages.

It is first and foremost a prayer that there may be a historical continuity between the apostles and all subsequent generations, between the apostolic age and the post-apostolic age. It's a prayer that the church's faith might never change with the changing years, but remain recognizably the same. It's a prayer that the church of every generation might merit the epithet apostolic because it is loyal to the apostolic faith which is enshrined in the New Testament.

So we need to ask ourselves whether our church is united with the apostles, whether we sit at the apostles' feet, whether we learn from the apostles and our infidelity to their teaching. The first kind of unity for which Christ prays is unity with the apostles and the second kind of unity is unity with the Father and with His Son, with the Father and the Son. The middle of verse 21 probably begins a new sentence.

And Jesus says, "Father, just as you are in me, you in me, we are united to one another, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us that is united to us," says that the world may believe. The implications of these words are truly staggering. Jesus prays that our union with the Father and the Son may be comparable with their union with each other in the Godhead.

So the unity we ought to enjoy with one another is as profound as the unity of the Father and the Son with each other in the Godhead. Verse 23, we may jump to that. "I in them and you in me that they may be perfectly one." So the unity for which Christ prayed is a unity with the apostles on the one hand and a unity with the Father and the Son on the other.

The first is the unity of a common truth and the second is the unity of a common life. Now, structural unity is very important. The visible unity of the church is a proper Christian goal, but only if it is the visible expression of something deeper, namely unity in truth and unity in life.

It is this kind of unity, a shared truth and a shared life which will bring the world to faith in Jesus and will be consummated in the final glory to which he refers in the last few verses. And let me recapitulate what we've tried to learn. Jesus' vision for his church, as seen in his prayer for his church, is much more comprehensive than his commonly thought.

It's not just a prayer for unity in a vague sense. It is a prayer, as we've seen, for holiness and mission as well and truth. So one of the tragedies of the contemporary church is the tendency we have to break up Christ's vision into bits and pieces, to select one or two of his concerns and to neglect the rest.

But friends, we have no liberty to do that. We may not wander through Scripture like a gardener in a herbaceous border, picking a flower here and discarding a flower there. Now, we are to stick to all four characteristics of the Christian church.

Now, let me give you some examples. The major preoccupation of the 20th century was the structural unity of the church without any comparable quest for its truth and its life. That, I think we must say, was the fault of the world council of churches.

It was seeking structural unity without concern for the truth and the life of the church by which the unity comes into being and grows. But others are preoccupied with the truth of the church. That is with its doctrinal orthodoxy.

Sometimes, however, becoming harsh and unloving in the process and forgetting the truth is to be adorned by the beauty of holiness. We don't want truth without holiness. Then there are other Christians who pursue holiness.

That is, the church is interior life, forgetting that the church has been sent into the world

on its mission. And yet others are preoccupied with the mission of the church, forgetting that the world will never believe unless the church is characterized by holiness, truth, and love. Truth, holiness, mission, and unity.

The four belong together. Indeed, I wonder if you've ever thought of this, that we declare these four characteristics whenever we say the Nicene Creed, particularly at the Holy Communion service. The Nicene Creed declares that we believe in one holy catholic, that is what that really means, is loyal to all truth, and apostolic, which is sent out into the world.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. So Christ's vision is that the church is renewal in all four dimensions. And I think if we may retain these four together in balance, we will be expressing what I sometimes like to call BBC.

BBC is standing not for the British Broadcasting Corporation next door to us, nor for beautiful British Columbia in Canada, nor for the Bethlehem Bible College, but for balanced biblical Christianity. And we so easily lose our balance that we will not do so if we hold on to truth, holiness, mission, and unity. Let's spend a moment or two inside in reflection.

Let's think of our own church. Most of us here are members of all souls, of course, but others here belong to other churches and visitors. Let's think of our own church and ask whether it is characterized by these four marks.

Truth, fidelity to the apostolic faith, holiness, not to be taken out of the world, but to be kept from the evil one, mission is the further cent. Christ, so he sends us and unity with the apostles and with the further and the son. Heavenly Father, these are profound truths.

We ask your forgiveness for times when our church does not altogether reflect them in a balanced way. But we pray that the church to which we belong, whichever it may be, may be increasingly balanced in the kind of Christian faith which it expresses. Hear us, we humbly pray, for the glory of your great and worthy name.

Oh, no. John Stodd has been sharing us how Christ prayed for the truth of the church, the holiness of the church, for the mission of the church and for the unity of the church. That was Christ's vision for the church before he went to the cross for us.

And you can discover what a living church looks like in John Stodd's book of the same name, the living church. It's our book recommendation for this week, and you can find details on our centenary website by going to [premierchristenradier.com/JohnStodd](http://premierchristenradier.com/JohnStodd). The legacy of John Stodd 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

Stodd, who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership.

To find out about this and other ministries, John Stodd founded, go to [premier.org.uk/JohnStodd](http://premier.org.uk/JohnStodd). Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stodd.

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