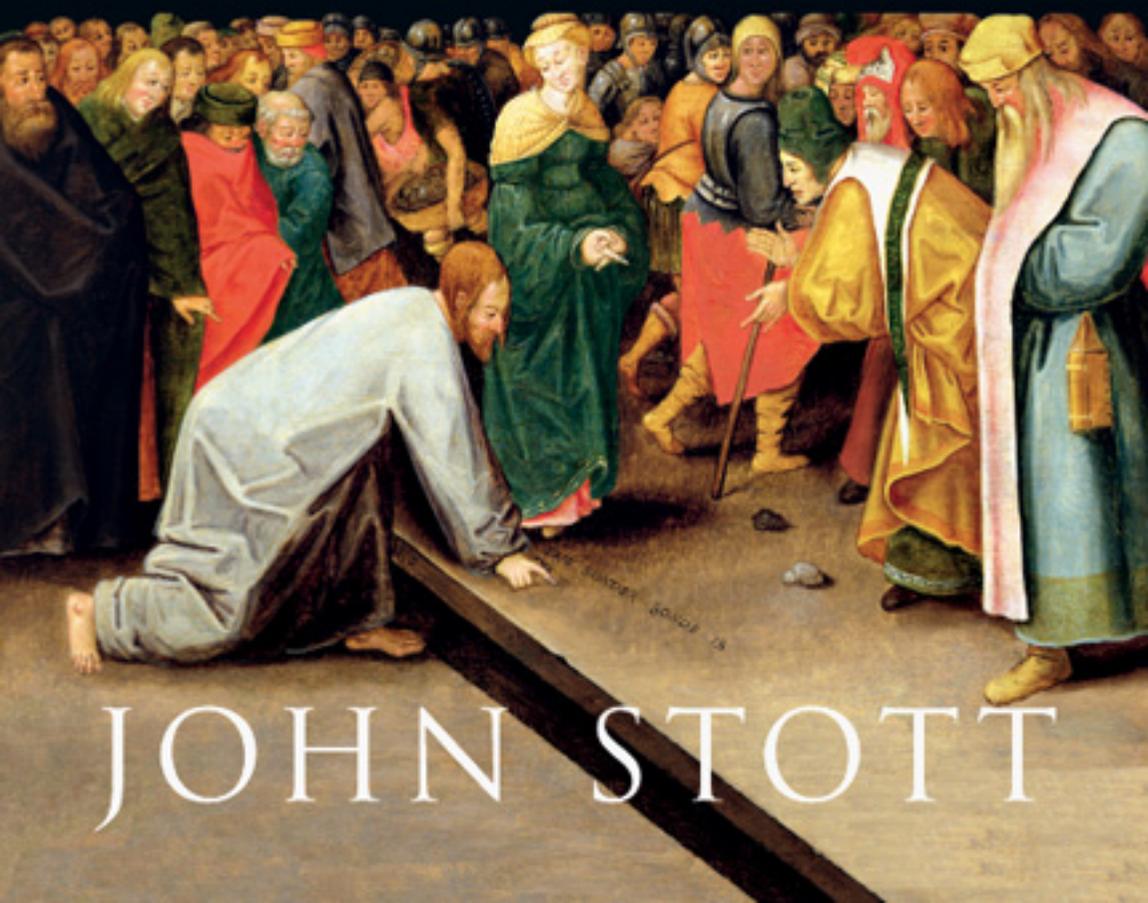


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# CHRIST IN CONFLICT

*Lessons from Jesus and His Controversies*



JOHN STOTT

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## FOREWORD



IT WAS AS A FIRST-YEAR STUDENT in 1970 that I first read this penetrating book. I entered a world which was entirely new to me, confronted by a university chaplain who had a very different view of the Bible, by religious groups that were hostile to the claim of the uniqueness of Christ and by fellow evangelicals who struggled to work together because of controversies over secondary issues. Stott's writing was a shaft of light for a rather confused freshman.

Stott described the spirit of the age, but it is striking that, re-reading the book over forty years later, it is even more relevant today. His remarkable foresight has been seen in many of the initiatives he launched, now bearing fruit around the world, but it is also evident in this book, including his anticipation of the intolerance of tolerance, the march of secularization, the engagement of a more confident Islam, the challenges to biblical fidelity in the church, the loss of the centrality of the cross of Christ, and the need for evangelicals to live the truth as well as to believe it.

So for a new day, there is still *an urgent need to confront*. Evangelicals now live in an atmosphere of philosophical pluralism, where sustaining our convictions regarding evangelical truth is more and more demanding. In most corners of the world, now including the West, there is overtly anti-Christian propaganda across

the media. Within the Christian community, the loss of Christocentricity and biblical literacy is typical of the big challenges confronting the health and growth of the church.

Not only so, there is *a need to confront wisely*. Stott's writing helps us to identify more precisely which battles must be fought and which issues need to be clarified. He deftly indicates which issues are primary and which can be laid aside. And in case we should imagine we will always find ourselves on the right side of the controversy, we might find Stott's perceptive biblical insights and application will also serve as a critique of some aspects of contemporary evangelicalism too.

And further, there is *a need to confront graciously*. Stott became known worldwide not only as a remarkably courageous and articulate defender of evangelical truth, but also as a man of great humility and grace. One of the special values of this title is that it models the way in which Christians should engage with controversy, and this is surely needed at a time when evangelical voices are often too shrill and strident, when the manner of our defense of the truth sometimes gives the lie to our commitment to that truth. I have often been struck by the way Stott exemplified the great leadership quality of being a man with a tough mind and a tender heart.

As in the first edition, this book carries a typically self-effacing prayer in its preface: "that God will forgive its imperfections, overruling what it contains of error that it may bring harm to no one and owning what it contains of truth that it may bring blessing to some." Since Stott penned those words, hundreds of thousands of believers have benefited enormously from his writing and his personal example, and so we pray that its rerelease will bring blessing to a new generation of readers around the world.

Jonathan Lamb

Director, Langham Preaching

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## PREFACE



**T**HE TITLE FOR THE ORIGINAL EDITION of this book was *Christ the Controversialist*. John Stott's intention was to indicate not that Jesus Christ was a controversial figure, but that he engaged in controversy. Much of Christ's public speaking took the form of debates with the contemporary Palestinian leaders of religion. They did not agree with him, and he did not agree with them.

John Stott's aim in studying these controversies of Christ was to clarify the issues being debated, to demonstrate that they were the live issues in 1970 that they continue to be today and to argue that the position which Christ adopted in each debate is the very position which "evangelical" Christians have always sought to maintain. He explained why he believed this exercise to be necessary in two introductory chapters, which we have called "Foundations."

In the first he sought to defend the task of theological definition. It was an unpopular task when he first wrote about it and remains so today. The non-Christian world is saturated with the spirit of pragmatism and owns up to being sick of the church's unpractical theologizing. And in some parts of today's church the same spirit prevails. Many have given up any hope of doctrinal certainty, let alone of doctrinal agreement. John Stott tried therefore to unearth the roots of this hostility to theological definition and to argue

that we must still pursue, and not abandon, the task.

In the second “Foundation” chapter he made a plea for “evangelical” Christianity. That is, having underlined the need for theological definition, he went on to urge that we must define Christianity “evangelically.” His concern was with truth, and in particular with the doctrinal position held by so-called evangelical Christians. What name we take or others give us is a trivial question in comparison with the great doctrines by which we seek to live and whether or not they are true. The doctrines we hold are commonly known as “the evangelical faith.” Whether it is correct to use this phrase isn’t really the issue. What matters is the substance, not the style. And the substance, John Stott claimed, is biblical, original, fundamental Christianity. He believed (with conviction and, he hoped, with humility) that this faith is the true faith of Christ, as he taught it to his apostles and especially as he defended it against its opponents and detractors.

The chapters which follow the “Foundations” are devoted to a consideration of Christ’s controversies. John Stott did not attempt an exhaustive treatment of them, but concentrated on the major topics of debate which (it seemed to him) were dominant in Christ’s day and still are now. He chose to consider, therefore, such basic questions as the character of the Christian’s God and of the Christian religion, the authority and purpose of Scripture, the way of salvation, the kind of morality and worship which are acceptable to God, the nature of Christian responsibility and of Christian ambition. On each of these matters Jesus Christ disagreed with the teaching of either the Pharisees or the Sadducees, and on each matter “evangelical” Christians are in disagreement with others in today’s church. Indeed, so John Stott’s argument runs, when we put together the truths on which Christ insisted in these controversies, the result is a fairly comprehensive exposition of what is meant by “evangelical religion.”

The theme of this book lingered and matured in John Stott's mind over a number of years. He took it for a series of sermons in All Souls Church in 1962 and again, further developed, in 1968–1969. He also gave a series of popular lectures under the title “Christ the Controversialist” both in Edinburgh in November 1968 (for the Edinburgh Evangelical Council) and in Auckland in May 1969 (for the New Zealand Evangelical Alliance).

Convinced of the book's enduring relevance, John Stott's literary executors are glad to reissue it in this new edition. We are grateful to Canon David Stone for his skilful work in editing the text for the twenty-first century. In doing this, some applications that would now be of only historical interest have been omitted. We have been careful, however, not to omit or dilute any of the author's challenges to Christian thought or practice. Nor have we introduced new material, which would have involved guessing how he might interact with issues or writers today.

We echo what John Stott wrote in the original preface: “I now send the book on its way with the earnest prayer that God will forgive its imperfections, overruling what it contains of error that it may bring harm to no-one and owning what it contains of truth that it may bring blessing to some.”

Part One

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# FOUNDATIONS



## A CALL FOR CLARITY



**T**HE AIM OF THIS BOOK IS SIMPLE. It is to argue that “evangelical” Christianity is real Christianity—authentic, true, original and pure—and to show this from the teaching of Jesus Christ himself.

Such an attempt to explain and to establish a particular brand of Christianity will not be welcomed by everyone—far from it! So let me therefore try at once to anticipate some possible criticisms.

### **I. DISLIKE OF DOGMATISM**

The first objection to the theme of this book will stem from a dislike of dogmatism. The spirit of our age is hostile toward people who state their opinions clearly and hold them strongly. Someone of conviction, however intelligent, sincere and humble they may be, is likely to be labeled a bigot. Nowadays the really great mind is thought to be both broad and open—broad enough to absorb every fresh idea which is presented to it and open enough to go on doing so for ever.

In reply to this, we need to say that the Christian faith is essentially dogmatic, because it claims to be a *revealed* faith. If Christianity were just a collection of human ideas, then dogmatic certainty would be entirely out of place. But if (as Christians claim) God has

spoken—both long ago through the prophets and in these last days through his Son (Hebrews 1:1-2)—what is wrong with believing what he has said and urging other people to believe it too? If there is a Word from God which may be read and received today, it would surely be both foolish and wrong to ignore it.

Of course the fact that God has spoken, and that what he has said is recorded in a book, does not mean that Christians know everything. We may sometimes give the impression that we think we do—in which case we need to be forgiven for our arrogance. As the apostle John makes clear in his first letter, for example, “what we will be has not yet been made known” (1 John 3:2). Back in the Old Testament, Moses was someone to whom God revealed himself to an extraordinary degree. Yet he was quite clear that God had only *begun* “to show to your servant your greatness” (Deuteronomy 3:24). Along the same lines the apostle Paul likened our present and partial knowledge to the ignorant chatter of a child (1 Corinthians 13:11). If Moses in the Old Testament, and John and Paul in the New, humbly admit their ignorance of so much truth, who are we to claim that we know it all? We need to hear again the sobering words of Jesus: “It is not for you to know” (Acts 1:7). He was referring to the times and dates which “the Father has set by his own authority.” But the same principle applies in other areas of truth. The limits of our knowledge are set, not by what we decide we want to know but by what God has decided to reveal to us.

Perhaps the most balanced statement of this comes toward the end of the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Deuteronomy 29:29). Here the sum total of truth is divided into two parts, “the secret things” and “the things revealed.” We are told that the secret things belong to God. And since they belong to him and he has not decided to pass them on to us, we should not attempt to force them from him, but be

content to leave them with him. The revealed things, on the other hand, “belong to us and to our children forever.” That is, since God has given them to us and they are ours, he means us to possess them ourselves and to hand them on to the next generation. God’s purpose, therefore, is for us to enjoy what is ours (because he has revealed it) and not to worry about what is his alone (because he has not revealed it).

We are to be clear about what has been plainly revealed and to admit our ignorance about what has not; and it is this Christian combination of dogmatism and agnosticism which we find so hard to get right. Problems arise when we allow our dogmatism to invade the territory of “the secret things” or our agnosticism to obscure “the things that are revealed.” We need to be able to tell the difference between these two areas of truth, the secret and the revealed. It is as much a sign of maturity to say “I don’t know” about one thing as it is to say “I know” about another—provided that our admission of ignorance is about something kept secret and our claim to knowledge about something revealed.

So Christian dogmatism is (or should be) limited. It is very far from being a claim to know everything. But when it comes to what is clearly revealed in the Bible, Christians should be neither doubtful nor apologetic. The New Testament reverberates with clear affirmations beginning “We know,” “We are sure,” “We are confident.” Just have a look at the first letter of John, in which verbs meaning “to know” occur about forty times. They strike a note of joyful assurance which is sadly missing from many parts of the church today and which needs to be recaptured. As Professor James Stewart has written, “It is quite mistaken to suppose that humility excludes conviction. G. K. Chesterton once penned some wise words about what he called ‘the dislocation of humility.’ . . . ‘What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place.’”<sup>1</sup>

What he means is that we should admit our limitations when it

comes to understanding truth but not doubt the reality of the truth itself. The problem is that this has been exactly reversed. As Chesterton says, "We are on the road to producing a race of people too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table." "Humble and self-forgetting we must be always," Professor Stewart continues, "but diffident and apologetic about the Gospel never." The dictionary which defined dogma as an "arrogant declaration of opinion" got it wrong. Being dogmatic does not necessarily mean being either proud or opinionated.

In other words, a broad and open mind, valued so highly in our day, is not necessarily a good thing. To be sure, we must keep an *open* mind about matters on which the Bible seems to be unclear, and a *receptive* mind so that our understanding of God's revelation can continue to deepen. We must also distinguish between the essence of a doctrine and our imperfect ways of understanding and stating it. But when the teaching of the Bible is plain, then continuing to maintain an open mind is a sign not of maturity, but of immaturity. Those who cannot make up their minds what to believe, who are "blown here and there by every wind of teaching," are labeled by Paul as "infants" (Ephesians 4:14). And having people who are "always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7) is a characteristic of the "terrible times" in which we are living.

## 2. HATRED OF CONTROVERSY

The second way in which the spirit of the age is hostile toward the theme of this book is the modern hatred of controversy. That is to say, it is bad enough to be dogmatic, we are told. But "if you must be dogmatic," our critics continue, "do at least keep your dogmatism to yourself. Hold your own definite convictions (if you must), but leave other people alone in theirs. Be tolerant. Mind your own business, and let the rest of the world mind theirs."

Another way in which this point of view is expressed is to urge us always to be positive, if necessary dogmatically positive, but never to be negative. “Speak up for what you believe,” we are told, “but don’t speak against what other people believe.” The Bible’s problem with this approach is that the Christian leader is not only to “[encourage] . . . by sound doctrine” but also to “refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9).

Opposition to intolerance arises naturally from a dislike of dogmatism. Indeed, the two usually go together. It is very easy to tolerate the opinions of others if we have no strong opinions of our own. But this is not something we should go along with. We need to make a distinction between the tolerant mind and the tolerant spirit. A Christian should always be tolerant in *spirit*—loving, understanding, forgiving and being patient with others, making allowances for them, and giving them the benefit of the doubt, for true love “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 13:7). But how can we be tolerant in *mind* of what God has clearly revealed to be wrong?

Certainly every right-thinking person will avoid unnecessary controversy, and we should steer clear of argument for argument’s sake. “Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments,” wrote the apostle Paul, “because you know they produce quarrels” (2 Timothy 2:23). There’s something wrong with us if we relish controversy. We should hesitate before getting involved in an argument. We must also be careful to avoid any trace of bitterness. Controversy conducted in a hostile way, which descends to personal insult and abuse, stains all too many of the pages of church history. But we cannot avoid controversy itself. “Defending and confirming the gospel” (Philippians 1:7) is part of what God calls us to do.

Perhaps the best way to back up the claim that controversy is sometimes a painful necessity is to remember that our Lord Jesus Christ himself was a controversialist. He was not “broad-minded” in

the sense that he was prepared to go along with any views on any subject. On the contrary, as we will see in the later chapters of this book, he frequently engaged in debate with the religious leaders of his day, the teachers of the law and Pharisees, the Herodians and Sadducees. He claimed that he himself was the truth, that he had come to testify to the truth and that the truth would set his followers free (John 14:6; 18:37; 8:31-32). His loyalty to the truth meant that he was not afraid to disagree publicly with official pronouncements (if he knew them to be wrong), to expose error and to warn his disciples about false teachers.<sup>2</sup> He was also extremely outspoken in his language, calling them “blind guides,” “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” “whitewashed tombs” and even a “brood of vipers.”<sup>3</sup>

It wasn’t only Jesus himself. The New Testament letters make it clear that the apostles were controversialists too. Jude, for example, appealed to his readers “to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people” (Jude 1:3). Like their Lord and Master, they needed to warn the churches of false teachers and to urge them to stand firm in the truth.

It’s sometimes suggested that this is incompatible with love. But take John, for example, well known as the apostle of love. We have from him the sublime declaration that God is love, and his letters overflow with appeals for Christians to love one another. Yet he roundly declares that whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ is a liar, a deceiver and antichrist (1 John 2:22). Similarly Paul, who in 1 Corinthians 13 gives us the great hymn to love and declares that love is the supreme hallmark of the Spirit, nonetheless pronounces a solemn curse upon anyone who distorts the gospel of the grace of God (Ephesians 1:6-9).

In our generation we seem to have moved a long way from this vigorous passion for the truth displayed by Christ and his apostles. But if we loved the glory of God more, and if we cared more for the eternal good of other people, we would surely be more ready to

engage in controversy when the truth of the gospel is at stake. The command is clear. We are to maintain “the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15)—being neither truthless in our love nor loveless in our truth, but holding the two in balance.

### **3. THE CALL TO CLOSE OUR RANKS**

A third argument against the attempt to define the Christian faith too clearly or too narrowly is based on the situation in our world today. We are reminded that the church in the West is steadily losing ground in many places. Not only is the population explosion outstripping the conversion rate, but forces opposed to Christianity are growing stronger. In some areas Islam claims to be winning more converts than Christianity. The ancient religions of the East are experiencing a revival in a number of countries where Christianity, together with a passionate commitment to nationalism, is dismissed as the religion of unwanted foreigners. Then there is the strong current of secularism in the modern world, sucking individuals and societies into its powerful vortex. Surely, it is said, in the face of this menace to the Christian religion, we must close ranks. We can no longer afford the luxury of division. We are fighting for our very survival.

This appeal for unity is a moving one, and we should not ignore it. It contains much with which we entirely agree. Some of our divisions are not only unnecessary, but an offense to God and a hindrance to the spread of the gospel. I believe that the visible unity of the church is both biblically right and practically desirable, and that we should be actively seeking it. At the same time, we need to ask ourselves a simple but searching question. If we are to meet those who oppose Christ with a united Christian front, what kind of Christianity are we going to promote? The only weapon with which the opponents of the gospel can be overcome is the gospel itself. It would be a tragedy if we were to abandon the only

effective weapon in our armory. United Christianity that is not true Christianity will not gain the victory over non-Christian forces, but will be defeated by them.

#### **4. THE SPIRIT OF ECUMENISM**

The fourth contemporary influence which is unfriendly toward the theme of this book is the spirit of ecumenism. In saying this, I have no intention of condemning the efforts of those in the ecumenical movement to draw Christians closer to one another. On the contrary, much that has been achieved in mutual understanding and in projects such as Christian Aid is right and good. I am trying rather to describe what may perhaps be called “the ecumenical outlook.” According to this point of view, no individual or church has a monopoly on the truth. Instead, all Christians, whatever their opinions, have their own “insights” into the truth and therefore their own “contribution” to make to the common life of the church. Those who take this view look forward to the day when all Christians and churches will come together and pool what they have to offer. Many see the resulting mix, hard as it is to imagine, as the ultimate goal. With an outlook like this, the evangelical desire to define some truths in such a way as to exclude others can only be seen as misguided and damaging.

The right approach of Christians who disagree with one another is neither to ignore nor to conceal nor even to minimize their differences, but to debate them. Take the Roman Catholic Church as an example. I find it distressing to see Protestants and Roman Catholics united in a common act of worship or witness. Why? Because it gives the onlooker the impression that their disagreements are now virtually over. “See,” the ordinary person on the street might say, “they can now take part in prayer and proclamation together; why are they still divided?”

But such a public display of unity is a game of let’s pretend; it is not living in the real world. Certainly we can be very thankful for

the signs of a loosening rigidity and of a greater biblical awareness in the Roman Catholic Church. In consequence, many individual Roman Catholics have come to embrace more biblical truth than they had previously grasped, and some have felt it right to leave their church. The reforms of recent years have so let the Bible loose in the church that no one can guess what the final result may be. We pray that under God it will prove to be a thoroughgoing biblical reformation. In some places, however, an alarming opposite tendency is appearing, a theological liberalism as radical as anything to be found in Protestant Christendom. The third possibility is that victory will go to those who oppose the reforms.

We have to recognize that, in keeping with Rome's claim that she is *semper eadem* (always the same), none of her defined dogmas has yet been officially redefined. This follows logically from her claim to infallibility. After all, if an utterance is infallible, it cannot be reformed. At the very least we must say that what restatement or redefinition there has been contains no explicit rejection of any statement or definition of the past. There has been no public acknowledgment of past sins and errors, even though this, for a church as for an individual, is an essential condition of reconciliation. Instead, contemporary Roman pronouncements swing between the progressive and the conservative, expressing the painful inner tensions of the church. Occasionally a word of encouragement is spoken which raises one's hopes that Rome is going to allow the Bible to judge and reform it. And then this flickering hope is snuffed out by a statement which seems to go back to where we began.

What is needed between Protestants and Roman Catholics is not a premature outward show of unity, but a candid and serious "dialogue." Some Protestants regard such conversation with Roman Catholics as going too far, but it need not be so. The Greek verb from which *dialogue* comes is used in the Acts for reasoning with people by using the Scriptures. Its purpose for the Protestants is

twofold: first, that by careful listening they may understand what Roman Catholics are saying and thereby avoid mere shadowboxing, and second, that they may witness plainly and firmly to biblical truth as they have been given to see it.

The essential thing in such dialogue is that we know exactly what we are talking about. Two people cannot understand each other's convictions if they have not first taken time and trouble to express clearly what they themselves believe. Much discussion is doomed to failure from the start because of this very lack of understanding. There are many who prefer to fight their intellectual battles in what Dr. Francis L. Patton has aptly called a "condition of low visibility": what is needed is more defining of terms, not less. This is the only way to clear the fog.

Dislike of dogmatism, hatred of controversy, love of tolerance, the call to close our ranks and the spirit of ecumenism—these are some of the modern tendencies which are unfriendly to the purpose of this book. But the Christian church, both universal and local, is intended by God to be a confessional church. The church is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). Paul pictures revealed truth as a building, and the church's calling is to be its "foundation" (holding it firm so that it is not moved) and its "pillar" (holding it high so that all may see it). However hostile the spirit of the age may be to an outspoken statement of the truth, the church has no freedom to reject its God-given task.