

Jesus replaces religion

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, good afternoon. Welcome. Come in and take a seat. Guys, it's great to be with you today. Over the last number of weeks, we've been looking through John's Gospel, and we're going to continue looking at John's Gospel shortly.

But we've also been looking at using the word one-to-one. We've heard some different examples of how it's been used, and we've looked at a wee bit of training in various aspects of how we can share the Gospel with our contacts. And I'm really pleased that a colleague of mine from London, Carl. Up you come, Carl. Carl's here to visit us from London. We're sporting the team haircut, as you'll see. So it's not a prerequisite, but it does help. And I'm just going to ask Carl a little bit about his involvement as a Christian. And just to give you another flavor, Carl does a similar role to me in London, where he trains people to use the word one-to-one, and he also uses the word one-to-one with his contacts. But I'm just going to ask Carl a couple of questions as we get into this. Carl, would you mind just telling us a little bit about how you became a Christian, first of all? Sure. Hi. Yes. I think the team haircut is known as an aggressive centerparting, where I'm from. So yeah, I became a Christian five and a half years ago, having spent four years looking into Christian things. So I grew up not in a religious family, not in a religious home. I had never considered anything to do with religion until I got into my early 30s. And a stranger actually stopped and shared the gospel with my wife and I. And it was one of those things that what he said, the truths and the reality of it was so big,

I figured that's actually worth thinking about. And that's actually worth exploring. And what he didn't know at the time is I had different issues going on in my life with my marriage, with my work, with alcohol, that sort of stuff. So I thought this was worth considering. But it took me a year before I did anything with it. But we went to his church a year later. And I wanted religion to fix all those issues that I had in my life. But when I sat down and talked with Eric, he basically showed me that I only had one problem, and that was my sin in front of God. And it was only through belief in Jesus that that could be fixed and sorted. So being a bloke, I did the typical bloke thing. I thought, well, I know what I'll do. I won't look at the Bible. That'll be a mugs game. Of course, they'll want me to do that. So I started spending some time looking at what other religions said, looking at what atheists thought, but got to the point where I could see Jesus was real.

So then started kind of dipping in and out of different churches and starting to read the Bible and just met a Jesus I wasn't expecting as I did that. And started bumping into, so Jesus that gave it to people straight. He told them what they needed to hear, not what they wanted to hear, no matter who he was talking to. And beautiful teaching, pray for those who persecute you, love your enemy, love your neighbor as yourself. And kind of over that three-year period, it's interesting. We're thinking about Bible sharing. I can't actually remember anything that a Christian really said to me. So in terms of evangelism, obviously, we don't want to be careless or unfaithful, but the pressures off. What I do remember through that period is those Bible verses. And it was on my own in the garden in the summer of 2014, where I read God shows his love for us, that whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly. And it kind of hit me. I knew I needed forgiveness.

I knew I needed to come to Jesus for salvation. Thank you. I don't know about you, but it's just so encouraging to hear that actually the start of that process was somebody willing to share something with another. And actually, I had no idea what was going on. And just to hear how God has obviously been working in your life before that and then after. Just one other question. We're looking at the Word one-to-one, where we're sharing the Bible with people. And it's a reasonably normal thing to do.

[4 : 28] But I guess for a lot of us, it's not what we always do or often do. Could you maybe just briefly share a little bit of your experience in sharing the Bible? Yeah, sure. So because I spent so long looking into Christian things, I knew as soon as I put my trust in Jesus, the resurrection had happened and therefore nothing else mattered. And I got into my 30s and I was oblivious of that message. And I knew most of my colleagues would be oblivious to that message too. So I set off as a really enthusiastic and terrible evangelist.

And I'm probably still a little bit like that. And I'd had two years chatting to one guy called Dan, where I was trying everything to win him for the Lord, taking him out for dinner, buying him drinks, cuddling him, kicking him, arguing with him. And we kept getting hung up on creation.

And after two years, I said, Dan, we're getting nowhere. Why don't we look at the Bible? And he immediately said yes. And then this panic set in. What on earth am I going to do in the Bible? I've never looked at the Bible with anybody before. But I knew about the word one-to-one notes from St. Helens. So I picked them up and I ran the worst one-to-one you could possibly imagine.

I turned up in Pret on East Cheap. I hadn't even opened the wrappers and looked at them. So I opened the wrappers. I'd forgotten to pray. And we sat down and I awkwardly just read through the first episode, kind of sweating on the book, feeling really weird.

And Dan said one thing in 20 minutes, Jesus has always existed. And I was in full-on panic mode. Has Jesus always existed? I think I've heard that. That sounds about right. Yeah, let's go with that.

[5 : 58] And I kind of nodded at him. And he went his way. I went my way. We turned up the next week and God had turned all his lights on. He was fully Christian. So God had needed five verses and kind of five minutes for something I'd been trying under my own steam for two years. And I immediately thought, I've poured her. You're an idiot. You've been taught every single week since you've become a Christian that the word of God is powerful. Why on earth have you not been using it in your evangelism?

So I then got all excited again for the second time and arranged 20 cups of coffee in 20 weeks with 20 different guys that I either worked with or had worked with in the city and asked them, would they like to read the Bible with me? And of those 20 guys, five said yes. And actually, I think the national average up and down the country to that question is 20%.

So it just set me off on a very exciting journey, really. Well, thank you very much. I think it's just good to hear people's experience with that and just to be so proactive and to hear actually the power again in God's words as people come into contact with it.

So it's hugely encouraging. Thank you, Carl, for sharing. Carl will be about at the end. If you want to speak to him yourself, then please do. But I'm going to pass over to Sam just now. Thank you.

Let me add my welcome to Mark's. And before I carry on, just want to echo everything that's just been said.

[7 : 37] I've been using the word one-to-one myself over the last few weeks. One of the wonderful things about it is it does make it an exploration together through God's word. You don't find yourself just trying to speak at someone.

It makes it possible to really read together in a way that lets people discover for themselves what the evidence really is for Jesus Christ. In a moment, we're going to read from the Bible.

But first, let's pray before we do that. Let's pray before we do that. Dear Lord Jesus, you are the Jesus we never expect.

You are not what we're looking for, what we think we'll find. And I pray, Father, that in the next few moments, you will once again turn our minds and our expectations upside down and remind us who you really are.

Lots of us have been busy today. Lots of us have minds full of worries. But I pray, Father, that you will show us right now just how this matters like nothing else does in all the universe.

[8 : 48] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now, I hope you'll open your Bible with me to the Gospel of John.

We're going to be looking at page 887, John chapter 2. Just as a heads up, by the way, from now on, we're not going to be putting out Bibles in the seats. So when you come week by week, either get one by the door, bring your own.

It's always helpful to get familiar with your own Bible. Either way, it should work well. But they won't be on the seats in future. So a quick warning on that. But let's read from John chapter 2.

We're going to start at verse 13. That's page 887. John chapter 2, starting at verse 13. The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons and the money changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple with the sheep and the oxen, and he poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

[10 : 05] And he told those who sold the pigeons, Take these things away. Do not make my father's house a house of trade. His disciples remembered that it was written, Zeal for your house will consume me.

So the Jews said to him, What sign do you show us for doing these things? Jesus answered them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

The Jews then said, It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days? But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus has spoken. So as we've said, we're looking at the gospel of John week by week.

We're looking at the evidence that leads to faith, that leads to life. And as we've already heard today, the Jesus you meet in this passage is the Jesus you never expect.

[11 : 19] He is very much a Jesus who tells people, as Carl was just saying, what they really need to hear, and who tells us what we need to hear. Up to now in this little gospel, we've seen Jesus in private.

This is the day when his public work begins. This is the launch party, or in a sense, the manifesto, acted out. And for those who have been there, who were there on that day, I'm sure for many of them, for ever after, he was that guy who cleared the temple.

He's really showing what he's about. And what he shows just blasts apart all our stereotypical ideas of Jesus, doesn't it? I mean, very obviously it blasts apart that Victorian picture of the suspiciously Caucasian bloke in the nightdress hugging little lambs.

But it also blasts apart the more modern, more acceptable idea that he's a great prophet, a great teacher, a reformer, somewhere roughly on a level with Buddha or Muhammad or Gandhi or Martin Luther King.

And this passage shows us in two halves what Jesus came to do. Firstly, that he did come to reform religion in verses 13 to 17.

[12 : 36] But then, in verses 18 to 22, he shows us that he came to replace religion as well. So firstly, he came to reform religion in 13 to 17.

Let me put that a little more strongly. He came to destroy hypocrisy and corruption. Let's set the scene.

It's Passover in Jerusalem. This is the greatest feast and holiday of the Jewish calendar. People from all over the world have come to worship, to sacrifice, to pray, to celebrate.

If you've ever seen TV footage of the Hajj in Mecca with those vast crowds steaming together, so dense sometimes that people are trampled to death, that's the kind of image that we have here.

And right at the center of it all is God's temple, the temple he had commanded to be built. And it's the one place on earth where God had promised his presence would be, where God would be with his people so that they could come, they could bring sacrifices, come near to God.

[13 : 42] It was a place where your prayers could really be heard and you could come to know God. And Jesus comes up to Jerusalem for the Passover too and when he goes up to the temple he looks around and he sees it's absolutely full of people selling oxen and sheep and pigeons and there are great big tables covered in coins for the money changers.

You see, all these people who have come to the temple were wanting to make sacrifices, maybe an ox if they were rich or a sheep or a pigeon and lots of them have just flown in from Egypt or Greece or Rome and it's a bit difficult to put a sheep in the overhead locker on your flight so they would come and buy their offering in Jerusalem.

And of course if you were giving some cash you want a good silver coin not one with some dodgy pagan god in it so you change your money there. And it's great some enterprising traders set up their stalls right in the middle of the temple.

You know, what could be more convenient? Come and buy your ox on sight, sir. No need to drive it through those busy streets you know what trouble it is getting through the narrow gates and no need to worry about hay and fodder and all of that.

Just come here it's only the smallest premium. You can have it right here right ready to bring to the priest. And as a result the atmosphere in the temple is, well, I don't know if you've ever had the experience of being in Paris or Rome or one of those great tourist cities and you're trying to gaze up at the Eiffel Tower and all around you you're being mobbed by souvenir sellers who are convinced that what you really need to complete your enjoyment of the Eiffel Tower is a small neon plastic model of it.

[15 : 21] Or maybe one in a snow globe would that suit you better? That's the atmosphere here. It's a little like Black Friday in the middle of Westminster Cathedral.

And Jesus' reaction is fierce. He doesn't fly off the handle. We've got to be clear about that. He's quite calculated. He takes the time to make himself a whip and after all you try moving a herd of oxen without a whip.

I mean, asking them politely to go home just doesn't have that much effect. But he does that. He makes it and he drives them out of the temple. This is a forceful man. He drives out the sellers.

He drives out the sheep. He drives out the oxen. He flings open the tables of the money changers pouring out all those coins on the ground. Just imagine the scene for a moment.

He's bellowing oxen and bleating sheep and coins underfoot. This is not gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Jesus has a real purpose and he is acting like he owns the place.

[16 : 23] Which, of course, is part of the point. And in verse 16, he backs up what he's doing with a command. Do not make my father's house a house of trade.

That's a slightly funny translation. The NIV, the other main translation, says, Stop turning my father's house into a market. That's why he's angry.

You know, there might be corruption or sharp practices going on here, but that's not the focus. He focuses on this. You have made my father's house an opportunity for profit.

This is my father's house. I'm God's son and when I come to see God's house, you have made it all about money. This is the house of God on earth. The place you come, the place you come to meet with God and you are making it an opportunity for a quick buck.

And imagine just how impossible that would have made real prayer. I mean, can you imagine praying in the middle of a cattle auction? You come easily to God in that atmosphere by choosing to make their money in this place.

[17 : 32] They have made sure the only kind of religion that's possible is one of quick transactions. Buy your offering, sacrifice it, head home. Duty done.

There's no reality to it at all. And that makes Jesus deeply angry. He is here to thoroughly reform that religion, to remake it, to make it possible, in other words, for people to come to God again.

He is claiming the authority to judge this false money-making excuse for religion. He's judging the hypocrisy. He's judging the selfishness. He's driving them out and making room for people to come to God.

And of course, Jesus makes exactly the same claim in our day. There are those who make religion a source of good money, whether that's the sharp-suited so-called evangelists on God TV raking in cash over false promises, making people's hopes and dreams a way of getting rich, or the little corruptions you might read from time to time in the newspaper, or equally, those who use religion as a cover for worse things, whether that's to molest children, or justify racism, or war, or hatred, or genocide, all of that, Jesus says, as he judges this temple, all of that I will judge.

One day, those who do such things will come to face-to-face with Jesus Christ, and it will not be gentle Jesus, meek and mild. It will be Jesus with a whip in his hand.

[19 : 10] Justice is coming. And the question is, which side will you be on? Will you be on their side or on his?

When Jesus' disciples see all of this, when they hear what Jesus says, they think for a moment, they remember what was written. You see, they're weighing the evidence carefully. Is this guy who he says he is?

Or is he, what is he? And long ago, King David, God's chosen king, had written in a prayer that zeal for your house will consume me.

In other words, David and the king who was promised to come after him, the great king of God, would be utterly, deeply passionate for God's house to be a place where people can know God.

And that passion will drive him to sweep away whatever prevents that, to judge that hypocrisy and that evil so that people can come. And in the end, that zeal, that passion will be so strong that it will consume him and be his death in the end.

[20 : 20] And the disciples remember that verse. They weigh up the evidence. And they think, yes, God did promise a king who would be a successor to David, a supernatural king who would reign forever and set things right, who would sweep away hypocrisy and evil.

And they see the evidence unfold their eyes and they think, this is it. This is him. This is the one who was promised long ago. But that's only the start.

Because then, in verses 18 to 22, we see that Jesus came not just to reform religion, but to replace religion. In verse 18, if you look, the Jews come to him.

And in context, in John, that means the Jewish leaders, because after all, they're all Jews. Jesus is a Jew. Disciples are Jews. But this is the Jewish leaders coming. And they say, what sign do you show us for doing these things?

In other words, what authority do you have? What authority do you have to barge in here and do all of this? You are claiming a serious authority here.

[21 : 23] And we need to be clear, they're not just looking for a miracle. If you have your Bibles, you glance over to verse 23, Jesus does lots of signs, lots of miracles this Passover time. People believe in him because of them.

They're not interested in all of that. They want something special, something totally unbelievable that will let him say, yes, I am in charge here. And notice, they don't even engage with whether what he's done is right.

You know that favorite ploy of dictators everywhere. You bring them to trial, you take them to the International Criminal Court, and they don't say, I didn't do it. They don't pretend the bodies aren't hidden somewhere.

They just say, this court has no right to try me. It's the same line. What authority do you have? These people will not engage with Jesus Christ.

All they care about is their authority. And so Jesus will not engage with them either. He gives that really cryptic, odd answer in verse 18. Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up.

[22 : 31] And they're completely nonplussed. Nonplussed. It's taken 46 years to build this temple. And they look around at the massive stones, some of them still there on the ground in Jerusalem today.

And they think, what is he on about? Haven't you rebuilt this in three days? More than three years just to get planning permission from the Romans. But verse 21, he was speaking about the temple of his body.

Now, Jesus is not answering them straight, is he? There's a very good reason for that. They don't want to think straight. His answer is so odd, it forces them to realize he's not speaking literally.

He is speaking about something else entirely, something deeper. In other words, he's saying, you're asking about whether I've got the right to clear out all this stuff that's going on in the temple. But seriously, I am upping the claim beyond that.

I am coming and I am replacing the temple. And you want sign? You want proof? Destroy this temple. Destroy my body. And something utterly unprecedented will happen.

[23 : 38] I will raise it right back up and walk and if three days later straight out of the grave you lay me in. Just like we heard already. If the resurrection really happened, nothing else matters.

Jesus is claiming something so big he is either completely off his rocker or he's God himself. Now, let's think for a moment about what he meant.

We don't think often about temples but as we've said already, it's the place you can come and meet God. It's the place you worship. It's the place you pray. It's the place you bring sacrifices to take away your sins so that the goodness and kindness of God can shower down on you.

It was the absolute heart of all their religion. And Jesus is saying this temple that you look around at, the prophets have said for a long time that this is going to be replaced and that day has come and the replacement is here.

And it's not something made out of stones. It's me. In my body, God himself has come to you. You can meet him and through me you can pray to him.

[24 : 49] Through me, you can know him. And through me on the cross, the great sacrifice for every sin will be offered. The old way is done. It was there to point to me.

And maybe you find that hard to believe but in that case, destroy this temple. Kill me. I will raise it up. Kill me, but I will not stay dead.

And notice in this story, nobody, literally nobody, gets what he's talking about. At least not at first. Verse 22. The disciples weigh up what he's saying.

They remember. They think about it. They're really weighing the evidence. They're engaging. And Jesus has been saying, they realize later, I will tell you what's going on, but only if you're interested in actually knowing.

Only if you are willing to put aside your own advantage for a few minutes, stop standing on your own authority, and really consider the evidence with an open mind. And those, his disciples, who were willing to do that, when his words were fulfilled, when he walked out of that tomb, when he'd risen from the dead, they put two and two together.

[26 : 07] They remember, just like they had in verse 17. But this time, they remember both the Old Testament scriptures and what they said, and they remember Jesus' word, his promise to do this as well.

And they put two and two together, and they think, this is God's king. But more, this is God's messenger. This is the replacement of all that went before. And they come from a halfway faith to a full faith, to a realization that everything revolves around Jesus.

As I said, this action is like a manifesto for Jesus' ministry. And as we conclude, we need to see the depth of the claim he's making here.

If you want to know God, you must come to me. Backed up with a promise of absolutely unparalleled evidence. He is the judge who reforms religion and sweeps away hypocrisy, and he is the temple who replaces religion and brings us to God.

And the question is, will we believe with the disciples? Will we do what they did, carefully weighing that evidence, thinking about what he said, about what he did, about what kind of person he is, and what it means for him to be the son of God?

[27 : 24] Or will we dismiss him as the religious leaders did? Because he gets in the way of our convenience, our way of doing things, of the little hypocrisies of our own lives. You know, we cannot look at Jesus Christ really weighing what he says and say that he's an important prophet, an important reformer, an important teacher, a good man, but nothing more.

To quote the somewhat over-quoted words of C.S. Lewis on exactly this topic. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher.

He would either be a lunatic on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice.

Either this man was and is the son of God, or else a madman, or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool. You can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God.

But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

[28 : 47] Let's pray. Lord Jesus, help us to see you clearly.

Help us to see your greatness. Help us to see the way you do judge and sweep away evil.
And help us to come to you and trusting to you to replace that temple, to replace religion,
to give us a way to come to God despite our own sins, our own hypocrisies.

A way to know you.