

The Call to Non Conformity

by John Stott

This sermon emphasizes the challenges faced by the church at the end of the 20th century, focusing on the need for radical non-conformity in the face of pluralism, materialism, relativism, and narcissism. It calls for the church to be a community of truth, simplicity, righteousness, and love, ultimately striving for Christlikeness in all aspects of life.

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Scripture: Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 3:18, 1 John 3:2, John 14:21, Genesis 2:24, Matthew 22:37, Romans 12:2

Description

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Transcript

Lord, I want to thank you for your body, your bride, the church. We're all conscious of its many imperfections because it's a body of which we are part. But we thank you for the great promises the gates of hell will not prevail.

And as we live in a world of tremendous tension, and in a church with tremendous tensions, we pray that you'll give us all vision for the future, confidence in you and wisdom. So help John as he speaks to us now. May he feel immediately at home with us, even though it's only a flying visit.

And may we all benefit from what we hear, and by your grace put into practice. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please give a warm welcome to John Stott. Thank you very much. Well, hello everybody, and thank you very much for your kind welcome.

I'm grateful to my old friend, Philip Hacking, for his generous words of introduction. Now the topic on which I'm going to speak tonight, slightly different from the wording on your program, is Contemporary Challenges to the Church. Or if you would like a subtitle, The Call to Radical Nonconformity.

All Christians know that the church has a double calling. On the one hand, to live and serve in the world. And on the other, not to be contaminated by the world.

The first might be called, A Call to Worldliness. Using the word as the opposite of other worldliness. The worldliness that means that we involve ourselves in the life of the world.

But the second could be called, A Call to Holiness. Refusing to assimilate the standards of the world around us. So we have no liberty either to preserve our holiness by escaping from the world, or to sacrifice our holiness by conforming to the world.

Escapism, on the one hand, and conformism, on the other, are both equally forbidden to Christian people. Instead we are to combine both callings, involvement in the world, and separation from the world. We are to develop what Dr. Alec Vidler called, A Holy Worldliness.

Now in our day, the common of the two temptations is not escapism, I think, it is conformism. The danger of accommodating ourselves to the standards and the values and the ideals of the secular world around us. We are exposed on every side, through print and radio and television, to cultural pressures which are incompatible with the Lordship of Jesus Christ, which nevertheless demand our capitulation, and which if we do capitulate, will compromise our integrity, blunt our testimony, and suffocate our spiritual life.

Now I wonder if we realize that this is one of the major themes of the whole Bible. That God is calling out a people for himself, and that he summons his people to be different from the world around them. Be holy, he says, because I am holy.

As a community you are different from the community around you. Now this fundamental theme recurs in all four of the major segments of the Bible. In the law, in the prophets, in the teaching of Jesus, and in the apostles, in the letters of the apostles.

Let me give you just a single example from each. Take the law. If you come across Leviticus 18, verses 1 and 2, God says to his people through Moses, you must not do as they do in the land of Egypt where you used to live.

And you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, into which I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and follow my decrees.

You see the call to be different from the surrounding culture. Well let's move on from the law to the prophets. I give you one example, God's complaint through Ezekiel.

You have not followed my decrees or kept my laws. But you have conformed to the standards of the nations around you. Well here is the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Do not be like them. Five monosyllables. There are the Pharisees, the hypocrites, there are the pagans around you.

Do not be like them. The call to a radical non-conformity to the surrounding culture. And then fourthly in the epistles we take the Apostle Paul's great letter to the Romans, chapter 12 and verse 1. No longer conform yourselves to the fashions of the world around you, but be transformed, be changed.

So here is a call to radical non-conformity. If you like it is a call to develop a Christian counter culture which is different from the culture around. Well with that introduction I want to ask and try to answer the question, what are the major contemporary trends at the end of the 20th century which threaten to engulf and envelop the church and which the church must resist if it is to be true to its own vocation.

I selected four. I think and hope we may have time to look at them. The first will take us the longest time.

It's the challenge of pluralism. Now today at the end of the 20th century the intellectual triumphalism of the European enlightenment has gone. And you will know I'm sure that what we now call post-modernism is a self-conscious reaction against the rationalism of the European enlightenment.

And the only confidence of post-modernity is that it lacks all confidence. It asserts that there is no such thing as objective truth or universal truth. All we have is a plurality of subjective culturally conditioned opinions with no criterion by which to judge between them.

So you have your truth but then I have my truth. And he has his, she has hers, they have theirs. There are thousands of different truths on show in the world today.

Well the correct name for this aspect of post-modernity is pluralism. Pluralism affirms not just the fact that there is a multitude of ideologies or religions but it affirms that all the claims of every religion must be treated with equal respect. Every ideology and every religion say the pluralist has an independent validity of its own and we must give up the naive and arrogant notion that we are correct and everybody else is mistaken and that we should try to convert anybody let alone everybody to our own opinion.

Now that's pluralism. And to anybody who has embraced pluralism nothing is more obnoxious than the Christian claim to uniqueness and the Christian concept of world mission and world evangelization. It was well illustrated in my view in a little anecdote I heard some time ago about a social worker in Nigeria who was visiting in the back streets of Lagos and came to a student who was in trouble and who had at his bedside a pile of books.

There was the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, the Koran, three copies of Watchtower, the magazine of Jehovah's Witnesses, a biography of Karl Marx, a book of yoga exercises and what I think the poor fellow needed most of all a popular paperback entitled How to Stop Worrying. Now that's pluralism. How should we respond to it? Well with great humility I hope and with no element of personal superiority or arrogance we have to maintain that there is such a thing as absolute objective truth because God has revealed himself to us not only in the ordered loveliness of the created universe but supremely in Jesus Christ who claimed that he was the truth and in the total biblical witness to Christ.

We believe that Jesus is the son or word of God who became a historical human being, that he's the rock on which the church is built and the church has no liberty to tamper with its own foundations. So the existence of truth revealed, objective, accessible is fundamental to the Christian church. The church is a community of truth whose responsibility is to confess the truth, to guard the truth and to communicate the truth.

Now let's be clear about the nature of our Christian truth claim. We do not claim finality and uniqueness to Christianity in any of its traditional formulations, Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Baptist, Pentecostal. We don't claim uniqueness for Christianity as a system in any of its traditional formulations.

Nor do we claim finality for the church in any of its cultural manifestations, African, Asian, Latin American, Western and so on. No, we claim uniqueness and finality for Jesus Christ alone. It is in him that the finality and the uniqueness are to be found.

You know the name, don't you? A Sadhu Sundar Singh, brought up in a Sikh family in India, wonderfully converted to Christ who became an itinerant Sadhu or Christian holy man. One day he visited a Hindu university when a professor said to him, what have you found in Christianity that you did not have in your old religion of Sikhism? I have found Christ, said Sadhu Sundar Singh. Oh yes, I know, said the professor rather impatiently, but what particular principle, what particular doctrine have you found that you did not have before? Well, the particular doctrine and principle that I found, said Sadhu Sundar Singh, is Christ.

So, wherein lies the uniqueness of Jesus Christ? As briefly as possible, I want to suggest that it is in three things, A, B, C. A, it is found in the incarnation. This is the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the one and only God-man, fully divine and fully human and nobody else in history has been like him in that. There is nothing approaching this claim in any other religion and the nearest is in Hinduism with its claim to avatars.

The word avatar is a Sanskrit word for a descent and it is the Hindu belief that the God Vishnu has descended upon certain human beings at different kinds in history and then has left them again. But the claim to the Hindu avatars is quite different from the claim regarding the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. For one thing, the historicity of these avatars is extremely dubious.

They appear to be myths rather than historical events. Secondly, they are different in that the avatars were plural. Vishnu came several times to several different people and then left them.

Not God in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God took human nature to himself once and for all and forever and he has never laid it aside. And having assumed our humanity, seated at the right hand of God this afternoon is the glorified God-man, Christ Jesus.

And then the third difference between them is that avatars were only temporary because Vishnu descended and then departed again whereas the incarnation, as I've said, is forever. So there are differences between the two. Jesus is unique as the incarnation of God.

And then, B, he is unique in the atonement. The claim of the gospel is that God took the initiative in and through Jesus Christ to identify himself completely with us. He not only took our human nature to himself in his birth, he also took our sin, our guilt, and our condemnation to himself in his death.

He not only lived our life, he bore our sin and he died our death. So that on the cross, God satisfied both his love and his justice. He exacted the just penalty of our sins by paying it himself.

And so he opened a way to welcome us home to himself without either condoning our sin or compromising his justice. And there is nothing, nothing like the death, the atoning death of Christ in any other religion. Let me quote from Bishop Stephen Neal, who had a great knowledge of the religions of the world.

He said, the good shepherd goes out into the wilderness to seek the lost sheep. That is to say, God in Christ takes the initiative in going out to seek and to save those who are lost with no grudging calculation of the cost to himself. And if in any other religion there is anything in the least like the doctrines of incarnation and atonement, I for one have yet to find it.

Unique in his incarnation, unique in his atonement, and see, unique in his resurrection. And by affirming that Jesus rose from the dead, we do not mean merely that his personality survived death. We do not mean simply that his influence continues in the world today.

We are not referring to him as alive when we say Jesus is alive. We do not mean that in the same way that Latin American Marxist students say Che lives, referring to Che Guevara, their great hero. Che lives, they chant.

When we say Jesus lives, we don't mean that. We don't mean simply that his inspiration continues. We mean that his body was raised from the dead and simultaneously transformed into an altogether new vehicle for his personality.

In fact, we mean that death was defeated because his resurrection body will never die. Now there is nothing approaching this in any other faith or religion which makes a comparable claim. Other religions look back to their founder and celebrate his teaching as it lives on in their own loyalty.

But Christians see Jesus as more than a dead but inspiring teacher of the past. No, he is our living, resurrected Lord. So he is available to those who call upon him.

And we claim to know him and to love him. And our desire is to live each day in the power of his resurrection. Besides his resurrection is the pledge of ours.

And it has these many implications if we truly believe it. So to sum this up, because in no other person than Jesus of Nazareth did God first become human in his birth and then bear our sin in his death and then triumph over death in his resurrection, he is uniquely competent to save. Nobody else begins to have his competence as the savior of sinners.

So let's not be afraid of the challenge of pluralism. Let us stand up to it because we believe and know that Jesus Christ is true, particularly in his birth, death and resurrection. Now secondly we move from the challenge of pluralism to the challenge of materialism.

The western world to which probably most of us belong is almost unbearably affluent in contrast to the developing countries of the third world. To visit a North American or European supermarket is to be exposed to a choice of goods so wide as to be positively embarrassing, confusing and even obscene. Such wealth of course is taken for granted by us and it leads naturally into materialism.

Now materialism is not an affirmation of the material order, the created order that God has made. If that were the meaning of materialism, every Christian would be a materialist because God has made the world and we receive it from his hand with thanksgiving. And to reject the material order that God has created is asceticism which we should avoid.

No, materialism is not the affirmation of the material order. Materialism is a preoccupation with material things until they suffocate our human spirit. At now last the spirit of materialism is seeping into the church and has corrupted many of us Christian people.

And against this background of materialism you and I need to listen again to the words of Jesus. Don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth. Again, beware of covetousness.

A human life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions. In other words there is more to life than money and property. And we need to hear the words of the Apostle Paul as well who calls us very plainly away from covetousness towards a lifestyle of simplicity, generosity and contentment.

He wrote, I've learned in whatever state I am therewith to be content. Again, godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world and it is certain that we shall carry nothing out.

Which is a kind of reminiscence of the words of Job in chapter 1 verse 21. Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall depart. I wonder friends if you've ever considered that life on earth is a pilgrimage between two moments of nakedness.

We enter the world naked, we die and are buried naked. Do you know the story of when the wealthy lady in the community died and everybody was very curious to know how much she'd left, the size of her fortune. And somebody was brash enough after the funeral to go up to the minister and whisper in his ear, how much did she leave? To which he had the wisdom to reply, she left everything.

We take nothing with us, we leave it all behind. So let's learn to travel light. And as the Apostle Paul also wrote, if we have food and clothing and shelter and whatever else we can justify as reasonable necessities in our situation, let us be with these things content.

For covetous people fall into a trap and the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. But do we hear that message in the contemporary church at the end of the 20th century? Where is the Christian protest against excessive materialism and the Christian canvassing of a life of simplicity and contentment and generosity? Let's not be ashamed to lay hold of this message of the New Testament. Do you know the story of the young American guy who once found a five dollar bill in the street? And who ever since that day never lifted his eyes when walking.

And in the course of the years he accumulated 29,516 buttons, 54,172 pins, 12 cents, a bent back and a miserly disposition. And you think what he lost. He couldn't see the smile on the face of his friends.

He couldn't see the beauty of starlight and moonlight at night or the blossom of spring. He couldn't see any of these things because his eyes were in the gutter. That's materialism.

And we need to lift up our eyes for the first glimmer of light behind the clouds that tells us Christ is coming again. And although we have our responsibilities on earth, of course, as good citizens, good husbands, wives, parents, whatever it is, students, yet we also remember that we're pilgrims traveling home to an eternal city. So let us avoid materialism.

The challenge of pluralism, the challenge of materialism, thirdly, there is the challenge of relativism, particularly ethical relativism. I don't need to tell you that all around us today, moral standards are slipping, certainly in the west, and increasingly elsewhere as television throughout the world is creating a monoculture. It used to be taken for granted that there is such a thing as absolute truth in opposition to error and that there is such a thing as absolute goodness in opposition to evil.

But today nobody seems sure any longer. People are confused as to whether there are any absolutes left. Instead of truth, pluralism reigns, and instead of righteousness, relativism reigns.

Moral relativism has permeated our culture and is even seeping into the church. Do you know this? You can hardly call it a poem. It's a bit of doggerel, really, but it makes the point.

It all depends on where you are. It all depends on who you are. It all depends on what you feel, and it all depends on how you feel.

It all depends on how you're raised. It all depends on what is praised. What's right today is wrong tomorrow.

Joy in France, in England sorrow. It all depends on point of view. Australia or Timbuktu.

In Rome, do as the Romans do. If tastes just happen to agree, why then you have morality. But where there are conflicting trends, it all depends.

It all depends. And those are the swamps of ethical relativism in which so many people are struggling today. Well, the most obvious example is the revolution in sexual ethics, which has taken place during the last 50 years or less.

It used, of course, to be universally accepted, at least in countries influenced by the Judeo-Christian ethic, that marriage is a monogamous, heterosexual, lifelong union and the only God-given context for sexual intimacy and sexual intercourse. But nowadays, even in the church, cohabitation before marriage and even cohabitation without marriage is widely accepted. Homosexual partnerships are being proposed as a legitimate alternative to heterosexual marriage.

And in the United States, now one marriage in two ends in the divorce court. Now, over against these trends, these politically correct trends, as they are called, Jesus calls us to obedience. And obedience is a very unpopular word today because people hate authority and the idea of submission, obedience, submission to any authority.

But Jesus calls us to obedience. He says, do you know this word of his in John's Gospel, chapter 14, verse 21? He who loves me, sorry, let me put it the other way around as he did. He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.

And he who loves me shall be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and I will manifest myself to him. So he who has my commandments, treasuring them up in his mind and memory, and obeys them, he it is who loves me. We claim to love Christ.

You don't prove your love for Christ by singing rather sentimental ditties, Jesus, I love you. That doesn't prove we love him at all. Nor if we make loud protestations of love, like Simon Peter, who went off immediately to betray Jesus.

There is only one way to prove that we love him, and that is by keeping his commandments or obeying him. And now we're talking about sexual ethics. We need to remember that Jesus quoted and endorsed the biblical definition of marriage.

And that is given us in Genesis 2, verse 24, where we read, Therefore a man shall leave his parents and cleave to his wife. You notice a man and his wife, singular, heterosexual, monogamous. A man will leave his parents and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Jesus quoted it. It isn't just the authority of Genesis. It is the authority of our Lord Christ, who said, What God has joined together, let nobody put asunder.

And what has God joined together? Answer, a man and his wife in heterosexual, monogamous commitment. We cannot get away from that. It's as plain as anything.

And the church at the end of the 20th century has to face this challenge of relativism. So now I think it's time for me to come to the fourth challenge, and then I will conclude. And the fourth challenge is the challenge of narcissism.

If you like, individualism, as exhibited in Narcissus. In Greek mythology, you probably remember Narcissus was a handsome young man, who once caught a glimpse of his image in a pond, who promptly fell in love with his own image and toppled into the water and drowned. Serve him right, you might say.

So narcissism is an inordinate love of myself. Narcissism is an unbounded admiration for oneself. Somebody's tried to put it in a limerick and said there once was a nymph named Narcissus who thought himself very delicious.

So he stared like a fool at himself in a pool, and his folly today is still with us. Now in the 1970s, narcissism found expression in what was called the human potential movement, which still lingers today. Eric Fromm, for example, taught that vice, if you want to know what vice is, it's indifference to yourself, while virtue is the assertion of yourself.

That was Eric Fromm's idea. Carl Rogers then came along and saw psychotherapy as helping a client to develop what he called an unconditional self-regard. There are no limits, no conditions to my regard for myself.

Then Abraham Maslow came along and laid his emphasis on the need for self-actualization, and the most important responsibility that any human being has, he says, is to actualize yourself. Now all these were and are secular movements. Those three names I've quoted are not Christians, they are unbelievers.

So it's not surprising that in the 1980s and 90s, the New Age movement jumped on the bandwagon of the human potential movement. Now the high priestess of the New Age movement is the American actress Shirley MacLaine, and she is infatuated with herself. I've read three of her books, I didn't enjoy any of them, but the good news according to Shirley MacLaine is as follows.

This is a straight quote from her. I know that I exist, therefore I am. I know that the God force exists, and therefore it is.

And since I am part of that force, I am that I am. Is that not blasphemous? Taking upon her lips the very name and affirmation of Yahweh, the God of Israel and the creator of the universe. So the New Age movement calls us to look inside ourselves, explore yourself.

The solution to your problems is within yourself. You don't need a saviour to come from heaven and save you, you can save yourself. Look within, find your own resources.

And unfortunately this preoccupation with self is now permeating the church. Especially in the popular but mistaken view that Jesus taught us not only to love God and to love our neighbour, but to love ourselves as well. But you know friends, that really isn't so.

And I hope that you haven't bought into that secular philosophy. And there are three reasons why we have to reject that teaching. The first is that Jesus spoke of two commandments, not three.

He said the first commandment is love God with all your being. The second is to love your neighbour as in fact being fallen you do love yourself. But he didn't say thirdly love yourself.

There are only two commandments. Secondly the word for love is this well-known word agape or agape. And agape means to sacrifice oneself in the service of another.

To give oneself in the worship of God, to sacrifice oneself in the service of a neighbour. And if that is the meaning of agape, it cannot in the nature of the case be turned in on itself. How can you sacrifice yourself in order to serve yourself? That is a nonsense.

Agape is always finding an object outside itself, whether God in worship or the neighbour in service. And then thirdly self-love is exactly what the Bible means by sin. Sin is transferring love from God to neighbour to self.

So I hope that we can be rescued from that false teaching. What then is a proper attitude to ourselves? Well let me simply put it like this. Every one of us is a paradoxical creature.

Because what we are as human beings is partly what is due to our creation in the image and likeness of God. Our rationality, our moral sense, our aesthetic artistry, our social relationships, our capacity for love and to worship. These marvellous human things come from the creation.

But what we are is only partly due to the creation and partly due to the fall. The twistedness, the self-centredness of our nature. So we have to learn what is it in our human experience that goes back to the creation and is good.

And what is it in ourselves that goes back to the fall and is evil. When we can discern those things, we are in a position to affirm what we are by creation. And to deny or repudiate what we are by the fall.

That's the self-denial that Jesus called us to. Well, it's a great relief to turn from this unhealthy preoccupation with self to the healthy commandments of God united and reinforced by Jesus. To love God with all our being and to love our neighbour as in fact because of our fallenness we do love ourselves.

Now everybody knows that love is the greatest thing in the world. And God intends his church to be a community of love. A worshipping and a serving community.

And we know why love is the greatest thing in the world. It is because God himself is love. In his innermost being, God is love.

So when he made us in his own image and likeness, he gave us a capacity to love and to be loved. Living is loving. And without love, a personality disintegrates and dies.

That is why everybody is looking for the authentic relationships of love. And people ought to be pouring into our churches if they are communities of love. Whereas often the church is the one place they don't bother even to look.

So convinced are they that they won't find love there. The church is a community of love. Would that it were so.

Well, now let me recapitulate and conclude. And we shall still have, I think, nearly ten minutes for questions. I've tried to bring before you some of the major challenges to the church at the end of the twentieth century and the end of the millennium.

In the face of which the church is called not to feeble-minded conformity, but to radical non-conformity. And over against the challenge of pluralism, we are to be a community of truth. Over against the challenge of materialism, we are to be a community of simplicity and pilgrimage.

Over against the challenge of relativism, we are to be a community of righteousness and obedience. And over against narcissism, a community of love. That is God's call to the church at the end of the twentieth century.

To be different. Radically different from the surrounding culture. That is why Karl Barth called Christian ethics the great disturbance.

Because it upsets our tranquil status quo. That's why C.S. Lewis called Jesus a transcendental interferer. Who wants to come from heaven and interfere in my private life.

No, but we are not to be like reeds shaken with the wind, bowing down to every gust of public opinion. We are to be like rocks in a mountain stream, unmoved and unmovable. We are not to be like fish floating with the stream.

Malcolm Muggeridge used to say that only dead fish swim with the current. We are to swim against the stream, against the mainstream of what is politically correct today. We are not to be like chameleons, those lizards which change colour according to their surroundings.

No, we are to stand out visibly against our surroundings. So in conclusion, what are we to be like? If we are not to be reeds shaken with the wind, or dead fish floating with the stream, or chameleons changing our colour according to our surroundings, what are we to be like? Is God's word entirely negative? Don't be conformed to this world, don't, don't. No it isn't, it's positive.

We are not to be like the world around. What are we to be like? We are to be like Christ. I want to suggest that we try to remember to keep three texts together, which make Christlikeness the ultimate objective of God for his redeemed people.

Christlikeness is God's eternal purpose, Romans 8.29. Where it says that we've been predestinated, eternally predestinated, to be conformed to the image of God's Son. He wants to make us like Christ. Then 2 Corinthians 3.18, it is also his historical purpose.

We are being transformed into the image of Christ, from one degree of glory to another. Then thirdly, 1 John 3 verse 2, it is also God's eschatological purpose. For although we don't know what we shall be in the next world, we do know that when Christ comes, we shall be like him.

Christlikeness, the predestinating, the eternal, the historical, the eschatological purpose of God. And nothing is more essential in our evangelism than the Christlikeness of the evangelists. I remember reading of a Hindu professor who noticed in the middle of one of his lectures that he had some Christians in his audience.

And he stopped his lecture and addressed them direct and said to them, if you Christians lived like Jesus Christ, India would be at your feet tomorrow. I want to change it slightly and say to you and to myself, if we Christians lived like Jesus Christ, the world would be at our feet today. And so it is to this personal Christlike authenticity that the world challenges us and Christ calls us at the end of the 20th century.

God give us grace to respond. A moment of prayer before question time. Our simple prayer, heavenly father, as we come to the end of our session together, is that you will fulfill your purposes regarding us and make us more and more from one degree of glory to another like your son, Jesus Christ.

Forgive us for our many un-Christlikenesses and make us like him, we pray. For the glory of his great name. Well, we now, I'm afraid, have only seven minutes, but there is a roving mic, I'm told.

If you put up your hand and want to ask a question. I can't myself see you in the darkness. Gentleman there.

Is there a roving mic? Oh, right. Could you ask your question? I will, thank you. I'd like to first of all endorse what Philip Hacking said at the beginning and thank you for the personal help that you have been, not only to me, but I'd like to thank you that you have been in no small measure a help to my son as well in our Christian lives.

Thank you. And what I would like to ask you now is in view of the publicly stated views of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, of his pluralistic views, whether you think there will now be a large exodus from the established church into non-conformity in the future years? Well, I'm not a prophet or a son of a prophet, and I can't tell you what members of the so-called established or national, I prefer the word the national church, will be if and when Prince Charles ascends to the throne and continues to say that he's a defender of faith and not of the faith. I don't know.

But I would be very surprised indeed if there was a large exodus from the national church on that ground. There might be an exodus on some other grounds, but the personal opinions of somebody who is purely the nominal head of the church doesn't seem to me to be of very great significance. Right over there.

Can you throw it across there? And then, is there one more down there? We'll just have time. Just another one down there afterwards. Thank you.

That's it. My sister is involved with the New Age movement, and she believes in a force. I'd like your advice on how I can persuade her that perhaps God is out there.

Or he is out there. Sorry, because your sister is a follower of New Age, you'd like advice as to how to persuade her. She believes in a force, some sort of force.

But that actually there is a personal God and not just an impersonal force. Is that it? That's the one. Thank you.

Well, obviously the most important thing we can do for anybody we're trying to win for Christ, whether New Age or not, is to persuade them to read the New Testament, and in particular to persuade them to read the Gospels. It never ceases to amaze me how many otherwise honest, educated, and intelligent people have dismissed Christianity without ever having investigated its credentials. That is, they've never read the Gospels, at least since they were kids at school, probably.

But now they're adults. I want to challenge them, have you read the Gospels as an adult? Have you exposed yourself to the testimony of the apostles of Jesus? Have you asked yourself as you read the Gospels the question, is it possible that this man is true? So that's where I would begin. And while they're reading the Gospels, pray, pray, that the Holy Spirit, who himself gave this testimony of the apostles, let us pray that he will illumine the mind of the reader and bring conviction to his or her heart and mind.

One final one over there. Thank you very much. Thank you very much for what you've said about materialism.

I wonder if I could just press you to go a bit further and distinguish a little bit between materialism and consumerism, the mindset of the consumer and how that is invading the church. Do you see anything there which really needs to be addressed? So you're asking really is there a difference between materialism and consumerism? First of all, yes. Pardon? Yeah.

Well, I don't really think there is. I think materialists are all consumers and most heavy consumers are materialists. Consumerism means not just that you consume what you need to remain healthy in mind and body, but it means that you are infatuated with consumerism.

And you know the great phrase everybody is using today, Tesco ergo sum. I shop and therefore I am. Don't applaud me.

That's not an original. I don't know who first said it, but it's a good quip. So I think they're the same.

Let's avoid them both. Well, our gratitude again to John for that tremendously helpful hour. And that's it.

Wish you a good day for the rest of the day. Thank you, John. Give John a big hand.

Thank you.

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