THREE CHALLENGES TO THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

By John Stott

Text: John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Romans 12:2; 1 Peter 1:16

Topic: Church in culture

Big Idea: The Scriptures call the church to reject conformity and live in holy worldliness.
Sermon Outline:

Introduction

• The church has a double calling: on the one hand to live in the world, and on the other not to conform to the world.

• We have no liberty to respond to one call without the other.

• Between the two temptations of escapism and conformism, the latter is more common—that is, accommodation to the prevailing culture.

• One of the major themes of the whole Bible is that God is calling out a people for himself—for his possession and for his glory—and that he summons his people to be different from the world around them. He says, “Be holy because I am holy.”

• This fundamental theme is founded in each of the four major sections of the Bible: the law, the prophets, the gospels, and the rest of the New Testament.

• This is the radical biblical call to nonconformity to the surrounding culture. Now we need to ask ourselves, What are the pressures of our culture to which we are forbidden to conform?

The challenge of pluralism

• Today, at the end of the 20th century, this intellectual triumphalism of the Enlightenment has gone. Postmodernism is a self-conscious reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment.

• The only confidence today is that we lack all confidence. Postmodernism asserts that there is no such thing as objective truth.

• Pluralism does not just affirm the obvious fact that there is a plurality of cultures and ideologies and religions in the world. It says that all these claims should be respected equally.

  ➢ Illustration: There was a social worker in Nigeria who not long ago was visiting a young man in one of the back streets of Lagos. On the bedside of this student he had seven different books representing seven worldviews.

• How should Christians respond to today’s pluralistic mood? With great humility and with no element of personal superiority or arrogance, we have to maintain that there is such a thing as objective truth.

• We do not claim the finality and uniqueness of Christianity in any of its traditional formulations. We are claiming uniqueness and finality only for Jesus Christ.
Illustration: Saduh Sundar Singh was a Sikh who was born and brought up in a Sikh household. When he was about 15, he was converted to Christ. “The particular thing I have found,” replied Saduh Sundar Singh, “is Christ.”

- Wherein lies the uniqueness of Jesus? His uniqueness is found supremely in three things:
  - Incarnation
  - Atonement
  - Resurrection

- Only in Jesus of Nazareth did God become human in his birth, bear our sin in his death, and triumph over death in his resurrection. He is uniquely competent to save. He has no rivals. He has no competitors. And he has no successors.

The challenge of materialism

- The Western world is almost unbearably affluent in contrast to the developing world. To visit a North American or European supermarket is to be exposed to a choice of goods so wide as to be positively obscene.

- Materialism means a preoccupation with material things.

- Jesus warned us not only against greed and materialism but against a false ambition—preoccupation with what we eat and drink and wear.

- The apostle Paul also calls us to a lifestyle of simplicity and contentment.

- We would be wise to travel light because there is no doubt that we shall leave everything behind.

  Illustration: There was a wealthy lady who died. “How much did she leave?” The pastor had the wisdom to reply, “She left everything.”

- Paul says that if we have food and clothing and shelter and the necessities of life, let us be content.

  Illustration: There was a young American guy who found a five dollar bill on the sidewalk. After that moment he never lifted his eyes when walking. From that time on, he accumulated 29,516 buttons, 54,172 pins, 12 cents, a bent back, and a miserly disposition.

- The tragedy is that, just as the Christian church is becoming so materialistic, there are many outside the church who are rejecting materialism.

- May God deliver us from materialism.

The challenge of moral relativism
• All around us moral standards are slipping, certainly in the West and increasingly elsewhere as television creates a monoculture.
• Moral relativism has permeated our culture and seeped into the church.
• The most obvious example of moral relativism is in sexual ethics.
• But over against these trends, Jesus Christ calls his disciples to obedience.
• Any concept of obedience is impossible if there are no moral standards we are called to obey. Obedience presupposes such absolutes. Jesus said,
• The only way to prove we love Christ is by our obedience.
• He is what we say he is, and we have no liberty to disagree with our teacher and no liberty to disobey our master.

Sermon Transcript

Let’s pray before I begin so that we may look to him for light. I’d like to use a prayer that John Calvin wrote in the 16th century that expresses what is in my heart and I hope what is in yours as well.

Heavenly Father, in your Son Jesus Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit and grant us that reverence and humility without which no one can understand your truth, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The church has a double calling: on the one hand to live in the world, and on the other not to conform to the world. The first is a call to worldliness, as opposed to otherworldliness—getting involved in the life of the world around us. The second calling is the call to holiness. We have no liberty to respond to one call without the other. Indeed, we may neither preserve our holiness by escaping from the world, nor may we sacrifice our holiness by conforming to the world. Escapism, on the one hand, and conformism, on the other, are equally forbidden to Christian men and women. Instead we are to combine both callings to involvement and to separation. We are to develop what Dr. Alec Vidler, an Anglican scholar of the former generation, in his book Essays in Liberality called “holy worldliness.” Are you familiar with that title? It’s a very good title to sum up what we are called to be and to do. We’re called to holy worldliness.

We are exposed on every side to cultural pressures. Between the two temptations of escapism and conformism, the latter is more common—that is, accommodation to the prevailing culture. We are exposed to cultural pressures incompatible with the Lordship of Jesus Christ, which, nevertheless, are demanding from us a capitulation that we are not
prepared to give. And if we do capitulate to the pressures of society around us, then we compromise our integrity, we blunt our testimony, and we suffocate our spiritual life.

One of the major themes of the whole Bible is that God is calling out a people for himself—for his possession and for his glory—and that he summons his people to be different from the world around them. He says, “Be holy because I am holy.” This fundamental theme is founded in each of the four major sections of the Bible: the law, the prophets, the gospels, and the rest of the New Testament. This is a continuing theme throughout the development of God’s revelation of himself in Scripture.

Take the law, to begin with. In Leviticus 18:1 and following, God says through Moses to his people, “You shall not do what they do in the land of Egypt where you used to live, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan into which I’m bringing you. You shall not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and follow my decrees.” Now there is a call to radical nonconformity. They were not to conform to the ways of either the Egyptians or the Canaanites but to be different from surrounding culture.

Do you remember God’s complaint to the people in Ezekiel 11:12? It’s very similar in language: “You have not followed my decrees. You have not kept my laws. But you have conformed to the standards of the nations around you.” God complains that his people were conformists. This is found, again, in 2 Kings 17:15: “They imitated the nations around them, although the Lord had ordered them, ‘Do not do as they do.’”

So then we move onto the third section, the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, and we find the same teaching in Matthew 6:8: “Do not be like them.” The Pharisees are one model of leadership. There is a pagan and secular model, on the other hand. In both cases, Jesus said, “Do not be like them.” The fourth example in the epistles is the well-known summons of the apostle Paul: “Do not conform any longer to the fashions of the world around you.”

This is the radical biblical call to nonconformity to the surrounding culture. Now we need to ask ourselves, What are the pressures of our culture to which we are forbidden to conform? What are the contemporary trends which threaten to envelop and engulf the church and against which we need to be on guard? I have selected three. I’m sure there are many more we could discuss, but these three are very important.

First there is the challenge of pluralism: the church is called to be a community of truth. Second there is the challenge of materialism: the church is called to be a community of pilgrimage. Third there is the challenge of moral relativism: the church is called to be a community of righteousness.

In each case we’ll try to understand the contemporary trend, evaluate its challenge, and consider how the church should respond to it.

**The challenge of pluralism**
Two hundred and fifty years ago, western leaders of the Enlightenment had boundless confidence in the autonomy of the human reason and in its ability, particularly through science, to discover truth and dispense with revelation and with tradition. Today, at the end of the 20th century, this intellectual triumphalism of the Enlightenment has gone. Postmodernism is a self-conscious reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment. The only confidence today is that we lack all confidence. Postmodernism asserts that there is no such thing as objective truth. The only truth is what seems to be true to me, and it may be quite different from what seems to be true to you. There is neither meaning nor purpose in our existence, and all we have is a plurality of subjective, culturally conditioned opinions with no objective criterion by which to judge between them.

The correct name for this aspect of postmodernism is pluralism. Pluralism does not just affirm the obvious fact that there is a plurality of cultures and ideologies and religions in the world. It goes beyond that. It says that all these claims should be respected equally, and we must therefore affirm the independent validity of every religion and every ideology. We must therefore give up the naïve and arrogant notion that we should try to convert anybody, let alone try to convert everybody. To those who have embraced pluralism nothing is more obnoxious than the Christian claim to uniqueness and the concept of world mission and world evangelization. Pluralism is an ideology that affirms the independent validity of every system or faith.

Maybe I could show you with a little story that illustrates the mood of today. There was a social worker in Nigeria who not long ago was visiting a young man in one of the back streets of Lagos. On the bedside of this student he found the following books: the Bible; the Book of Common Prayer, I’m glad to see; the Koran; three copies of Watchtower, the magazine of the Jehovah’s Witnesses; a biography of Karl Marx; a book of yoga exercises; and a popular paperback that he particularly needed entitled How to Stop Worrying. That is typical of the modern mood, a mood of syncretism and of pluralism.

How should Christians respond to today’s pluralistic mood? With great humility and with no element of personal superiority or arrogance, we have to maintain that there is such a thing as objective truth. God has revealed himself to the world not only in the ordered loveliness of the created universe but supremely in Jesus Christ and in the full biblical witness to Christ. Jesus Christ is God’s Son, the Word, who became a historical human being. He is the rock on which the church is built, and the church has no liberty to tamper with its own foundations. Its calling is, on the one hand, to defend and preserve the truth that has been entrusted to it and, on the other, to proclaim it without fear or favor to the whole world. The existence of truth revealed, objective, and accessible is fundamental to the life of the church. The church is a community of truth. The church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and it is a community confessing, guarding, and communicating the truth, committed to it.

At this point notice and declare the nature of this truth claim. We do not claim the finality and uniqueness of Christianity in any of its traditional formulations, whether Catholic or Orthodox or Protestant or Reformed or Baptist or Pentecostal. We’re not even claiming
uniqueness for the church in any of its cultural manifestations in Latin America, Asia, Africa, or the West. We are claiming uniqueness and finality only for Jesus Christ.

Sadu Sundar Singh was a Sikh who was born and brought up in a Sikh household. When he was about 15, he was converted to Christ through some kind of vision and became an itinerant Sadhu, or holy man, until he was lost in the Tibetan mountains. He once was accosted by an agnostic professor of comparative religions in a Hindu college who asked him what he’d found in Christianity that he had not found in his old religion. “I have Christ,” he replied. “I know,” said the professor rather impatiently. “But what particular principle or doctrine have you found that you did not have before?” “The particular thing I have found,” replied Sadu Sundar Singh, “is Christ.” So we have to maintain the uniqueness and the finality of that historic person, the God-Man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Wherein lies the uniqueness of Jesus? I don’t have time to answer that question in fullness, but his uniqueness is found supremely in three things:

**Incarnation**

His uniqueness is found in his incarnation. Jesus of Nazareth was and is the one and only God-Man, perfect in godhead and perfect in manhood, fully divine and fully human, and there is nothing approaching this claim in any other religion. The nearest you get to it is in Hinduism, in the avatars—meaning descents and ought not to be translated incarnations—of the god Vishnu in a succession of historical beings like the lord Krishna. But these avatars in Hinduism are quite different from the claim to incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

For one thing, their historicity is extremely dubious. Even if you could prove that they were not historical events, Hinduism would be entirely unscathed. Hinduism is not interested in history. Hinduism is a collection of ethical and philosophical ideas. Christianity, on the other hand, is essentially a historical religion. If you could disprove that God became human in the person of the historic Jesus, then Christianity is doomed.

Then there is the plurality of the avatars. The god Vishnu descended, became “reincarnated” in a human being, went back again, back and forth. Our belief is quite different. Almighty God took human nature to himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth once and for all, and he has never laid aside the humanity that he assumed. The God-Man Christ Jesus is at the right hand of the Father today in glory.

**Atonement**

Jesus Christ is also unique in his atonement. The gospel claims that God took the initiative in and through Jesus Christ to identify himself completely with human beings. He not only took our human nature in his birth, but he took our sin, guilt, and condemnation to himself in his death. So he lived our life, and he died our death instead of us. New Testament obliges us to say this. We will never suggest that God the Father was reluctant to save us, and Jesus Christ came instead as a third party delivering us from the wrath of God. No, God himself took the initiative in his holy love, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, and he pursued us even to the desolate agony of the cross. On the cross God satisfied both his love...
and his justice, but in exacting the penalty for sin he paid it himself, opening the way to welcome us home to himself without either condoning our sin or compromising his justice. There is nothing like this in any other religion or ideology. Others place the initiative in our hands. They assure us we can make the grade. Every other religion is, in the end, a religion of human merit and human initiative.

Do you remember the parliament of religions that took place in Chicago in 1893? One of the main figures in that parliament was Vivekananda, that great Hindu reformer. He said in a notable speech, “It is a sin to call a man a sinner. You are not sinners,” he said. “You are children of God. You are angels.” In other words, you have no need for salvation. It was a proclamation of self-salvation without the need for any savior to come to our rescue.

In Judaism it was recognized that if a sinner repented and stumbled home, God would receive and forgive such a person. But there was no initiative on God’s part. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father ran out to his son. The good shepherd goes out into the wilderness to seek and to save the lost. Bishop Stephen Neill, a well-known Anglican scholar, wrote this about the atonement:

> The good shepherd goes out into the wilderness to seek the lost sheep. 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. If any other religion has anything in the least like the doctrines of incarnation and atonement, I have yet to find it.

**Resurrection**

By affirming that Jesus rose from the dead, we do not merely mean his personality survived death or that his influence continues in the world. Latin American students can chant, “Che Guevara lives!” But we don’t mean that when we speak of Jesus being alive. We mean, rather, that his body was raised from death and changed into a new vehicle for his personality, so that death was defeated; his resurrection body will never die. So the resurrection is quite different from the resuscitations that Jesus did during his public ministry. Lazarus had to die again. C.S. Lewis had great sympathy for Lazarus because he had to die all over again. But Jesus rose from the dead and was changed, transformed, never to die again.

There is no other faith or religion that makes a claim comparable to that. Other religions look back to their founders and celebrate their teachings. But Christians see Jesus as more than a dead teacher of the past. He is our living, resurrected Lord, available and accessible to those who call on him. We claim to know him. We desire to live in the power of his resurrection.

His incarnation, his atonement, and his resurrection—the three fundamental events in the saving career of Jesus—are equally unique. Only in Jesus of Nazareth did God become human in his birth, bear our sin in his death, and triumph over death in his resurrection. He is uniquely competent to save. He has no rivals. He has no competitors. And he has no
successors. I beg you, sisters and brothers, lift up your voices without fear and proclaim the uniqueness of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I beg you not to give in to the pressures of pluralism. Have you read Professor John Hick and Professor Paul Knitter’s book *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*? There may be a myth in Christian uniqueness, but not in the uniqueness of Christ. That is no myth. It is the plain, historical, scientific truth about Jesus.

**The challenge of materialism**

Now we come to something quite different: the challenge of materialism. The Western world is almost unbearably affluent in contrast to the developing world. To visit a North American or European supermarket is to be exposed to a choice of goods so wide as to be positively obscene. Such wealth, of course, is taken for granted by us who live in the West, and it leads to materialism. Rejection of materialism is not a rejection of the material order. On the contrary, we believe in a God who created the material order. A rejection of the material order should be called asceticism. Materialism means a preoccupation with material things. In defiance of Jesus’ teaching, the spirit of materialism has seeped into the church and has corrupted many professing Christian men and women. Jesus said, “Don’t store up for yourselves treasures on earth” (Matt. 6:19). He also said, “Beware of covetousness. A human life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions” (Luke 12:15). In other words, there is more to life than property and money.

Jesus warned us not only against greed and materialism but against a false ambition—preoccupation with what we eat and drink and wear. Our supreme preoccupation should be with the glory of God, the kingdom of God, the name of God. Materialism involves constant concern with my needs and my material comfort. And that is a hopelessly inadequate ambition for the children of God. We are called to be ambitious for God and not ambitious for ourselves.

The apostle Paul also calls us to a lifestyle of simplicity and contentment. “I have learned,” he said, “in whatever state I am therewith to be content” (Phil. 4:11). In 1 Timothy 6:6, Paul said, “Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into this world and we shall take nothing out of it.” Or as Job put it, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb and naked I shall return.” Have you ever considered, brothers and sisters, that human life is a pilgrimage between two moments of nakedness? We would be wise to travel light because there is no doubt that we shall leave everything behind.

There was a wealthy lady who died, and everybody in the community was extremely curious as to the extent of her fortune. One person was brash enough to come up to the pastor immediately after the funeral and whisper in his ear, “How much did she leave?” The pastor had the wisdom to reply, “She left everything.”

Paul says that if we have food and clothing and shelter and the necessities of life, let us be content. Covetous people fall into a trap: “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” We must be concerned about the material world because God has given us a material body and put us in a material universe. Yet we always need to remember that we’re pilgrims.
traveling home to God. We’re citizens of two kingdoms, but we very often forget the eternal kingdom in our preoccupation with the temporary one.

There was a young American guy who found a five dollar bill on the sidewalk. After that moment he never lifted his eyes when walking. From that time on, he accumulated 29,516 buttons, 54,172 pins, 12 cents, a bent back, and a miserly disposition. He couldn’t see what I see as I look at you, the smile on the face of his friends. He couldn’t see the beauty of the sunshine or the moonlight and the stars or the blossom in springtime. His eyes were in the gutter. There are many Christians like that. Our eyes are in the gutter. We need to lift up our eyes. Don’t misunderstand me. We have responsibilities on earth. But we’re traveling to an eternal city. If only we could be preoccupied with that.

The tragedy is that, just as the Christian church is becoming so materialistic, there are many outside the church who are rejecting materialism. The New Age movement is the latest of many movements that have done the same thing. Whatever we may think of the New Age movement, we have to reject most of its teaching. There is a quest for transcendence, a recognition that the human spirit will never be satisfied by the material order. It’s the main reason for the collapse of Euro-Marxism. Marxism was offered as an ideological substitute for religion, and Marx confidently predicted that religion would wither away and die. But the human spirit cannot be satisfied with the material. As Jesus said, quoting Deuteronomy, “The human being doesn’t live by bread only but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

There is an order above the material order. Theodore Roszak, although he lived and wrote before the New Age began, wrote about this. He couldn’t bear what he called the “Coca-Cola-nization” of the world. He hated the pseudoscience that claims to explain everything, and he couldn’t bear the undoing of the mysteries. When science gets its hand on something, there are no mysteries left. Roszak, a non-Christian, said that life is full of mystery. He said, “Without transcendence the person shrivels.” May God deliver us from materialism.

**The challenge of moral relativism**

All around us moral standards are slipping, certainly in the West and increasingly elsewhere as television creates a monoculture. It used to be assumed that absolute truth exists in opposition to error and absolutely goodness exists in opposition to evil. But nobody seems sure of these things any longer. People are confused whether there are any absolutes left. Instead of truth, pluralism reigns; instead of righteousness, relativism reigns. Moral relativism has permeated our culture and seeped into the church. The American moral philosopher Abraham Ebel offered the following expression of moral relativism:

> It all depends on where you are and 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, and it all depends on what is praised. What’s right today is wrong tomorrow. Joy in France and England’s sorrow. It all depends on point of view, Australia or

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

That’s the morass of relativism in which so many of our young people are floundering today.

The most obvious example of moral relativism is in sexual ethics. It used to be almost universally accepted, at least in countries influenced by the Judeo-Christian ethic, that marriage is a monogamous, heterosexual, lifelong union, and it is the only God-given context for sexual intimacy or intercourse. But nowadays, even in the church, cohabitation before marriage is widely accepted. Homosexual partnerships are being proposed as a legitimate alternative to heterosexual marriage. One in two marriages ends in divorce in this country.

But over against these trends, Jesus Christ calls his disciples to obedience. Any concept of obedience is impossible if there are no moral standards we are called to obey. Obedience presupposes such absolutes. Jesus said, “Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them” (John 14:21). There we learn that the only way to prove we love Christ is by our obedience. We don’t prove we love him by making protestations of loyalty. Simon Peter did this and went straight off to betray him. We don’t persuade anybody of our love for Jesus by singing sentimental ditties in church: “Jesus, I love you.” That doesn’t prove we love him at all. The only way to prove we love Christ is by our obedience.

And he rewards our obedience. If we love him, he will love us and will manifest himself to us. I love that promise of a self-manifestation of Christ. So many of us are longing to know Christ better, to be able to apprehend him with reality, so that he is real in our human experience. How can we come to know Christ? He will manifest himself, make himself known to his lovers, those who obey him. The test of love is obedience, and the reward of obedience is a self-manifestation of Christ, over against this relativism in which we flounder.

Christians have no liberty either to disagree with Jesus or to disobey him. John 13:13 has been quite important in my own development. In the Upper Room after washing his disciples’ feet, our Lord said to them, “You call me Teacher and Lord.” You call me rabbi. You call me Master. Those are courtesy titles that you give me. “You are right,” he said, “that is what I am.” In other words, to call him teacher and master is not just a courtesy title. It bears witness to reality. He is what we say he is, and we have no liberty to disagree with our teacher and no liberty to disobey our master. In this submission to the authority of Jesus as Lord, we find our freedom.
For Your Reflection

Personal growth:
How has this sermon fed your own soul? ________________________________

Skill growth:
What did this sermon teach you about how to preach?
____________________________________________________________________

Exegesis and exposition:
Highlight the paragraphs in this sermon that helped you better understand Scripture. How does the sermon model ways you could provide helpful biblical exposition for your hearers?
____________________________________________________________________

Theological Ideas:
What biblical principles in this sermon would you like to develop in a sermon? How would you adapt these ideas to reflect your own understanding of Scripture, the Christian life, and the unique message that God is putting on your heart?
____________________________________________________________________

Outline:
How would you improve on this outline by changing the wording, or by adding or subtracting points? ________________________________

Application:
What is the main application of this sermon? What is the main application of the message you sense God wants you to bring to your hearers?
____________________________________________________________________

Illustrations:
Which illustrations in this sermon would relate well with your hearers? Which cannot be used with your hearers, but they suggest illustrations that could work with your hearers?
____________________________________________________________________

Credit:
Do you plan to use the content of this sermon to a degree that obligates you to give credit? If so, when and how will you do it? ________________________________