

# The Finality of Christ in Stott's Christology

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## Abstract

This article aims to stress how John Stott stood up to defend classical Christology in contemporary Christianity. The significance of his method was heightened by the complex context of global pluralism and inclusivism, which sought to compromise biblical and orthodox Christian claims to salvation. We limit ourselves to some key pluralists, John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Clark Pinnock, Stott responded to. The temptation to compromise classical Christology has increased since the twentieth century, and Stott's insistence on the finality of Christ is a great legacy that must be sustained. He shows inconsistency in his view of penal substitution and a departure from the orthodox view, but this essay critically accentuates the positive value of his Christology.

## Keywords

*Christology, finality, divinity, exclusive, pluralism, substitutionary atonement*

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## Introduction

**J**ohn Stott has left a great christological legacy: we can appreciate on the one hand his astute defense of the uniqueness of Christ by virtue of his divinity against the assaults of the pluralist theologians and on the other his weakness in drifting from orthodoxy on his view of penal substitution. His works form a theological

bridge between the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He was “one of the greatest Christian writers, speakers, thinkers, and leaders of the twentieth century.”<sup>1</sup> His vast scholarship has as its nucleus the divine essence of Christ, which is set against the polemics of pluralism. To put all his christological arguments together in a concise manner without leaving out some important points is not easy. I have tried to present his basic christological thoughts and how crucial they are to our time. Stott labored to defend the classical christological views that have made the Christian claim about salvation exclusive. He was not reformulating Christology in a new way but defending the classical view with the utmost vigor. In his theological corpus, keywords recur that are unique to his defense of the person and authority of Christ—“authentic,” “finality,” “incomparable,” and “uniqueness,” among others—and the goal of recovering the authentic, “historical biblical Christ” is paramount.<sup>2</sup>

What makes his work crucial is that he responded to a pluralism that sought to compromise the church’s christological claims for the sake of peace with competing religions. Pluralism was occasioned by the rise of secularization, “an increase in religious alternatives,” and the rise of the “postmodern imagination.”<sup>3</sup> While liberalism was striving hard to force a compromise of the exclusive claims of the gospel, Stott stood firm; he was “never seriously tempted to compromise for the sake of peace or to weaken when confronted with very charming and impressive liberals.”<sup>4</sup> His defense of traditional Christianity is a legacy that he has bequeathed to our generation, and we must sustain it as our calling to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Before appreciating Stott’s labors, we will briefly sketch the representative views of pluralism and inclusivism, three major proponents of which are John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Clark Pinnock.

## **I. The Challenge of Religious Pluralism and Inclusivism**

Pluralism is the religious and philosophical view that recognizes the plurality of religions within multiple cultural backgrounds that shape beliefs and practices; its advocates insist that all religions are equal and none of them

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<sup>1</sup> Alistair McGrath, “Foreword to the 2006 Edition,” in John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>2</sup> John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 54.

<sup>3</sup> Stott, *Issues*, 71–74.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Barclay, “The Young Defender of the Faith,” in *John Stott: A Portrait by His Friends*, ed. Chris Wright (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 33.

has qualifications that warrant exclusive claims. While the prevailing concern for Christian philosophers about pluralism is the relationship that should exist between Christianity and other world religions, a relationship that would force relativism on Christianity, Stott's concern is the sinful human condition, the solution that God provides, and how he provides it.

For Stott, Christianity has become an endangered species because religious pluralism surrounds it. Therefore, he poses an important question: "So what are the contemporary trends which threaten to swallow us up, and which we must resist?"<sup>5</sup> He answers that those trends are pluralism, materialism, ethical relativism, and narcissism.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, he lists the contending options as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.<sup>7</sup> Inclusivism and pluralism both target the claims of Christ's "finality and uniqueness."<sup>8</sup> With this, the gospel stands or falls. Therefore, the defense of the person of Christ became central to all of Stott's works.<sup>9</sup>

### 1. *John Hick*

Hick states that the basic concern of pluralism is "the problem of the relation between Christianity and other religions" within the global context.<sup>10</sup> This relational matter is on top of the "theological agenda" expressed by exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism; Hick rejects the first two and stands on the third.<sup>11</sup> He argues that it is unrealistic for the concept of the salvation of humankind to be embedded in a minority religion like Christianity.<sup>12</sup> However, if Christianity does not have an offer that is exclusive, what is the essence of any dialogue or mission, since dialogue presents what the other party does not have? Nevertheless, Hick argues that there is a need for "a re-understanding of such central Christian ideas as Incarnation, Trinity and Atonement" because the existing formulation is fraught with "unacceptably imperialistic implications," to which the solution is a possible "Christian self-understanding" that is "compatible with religious pluralism."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> John Stott, *The Radical Disciple* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–29.

<sup>7</sup> John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 297.

<sup>8</sup> Stott, *Radical Disciple*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> George Carey, foreword to John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 9.

<sup>10</sup> John Hick, "Preface to the 1988 Reissue," in *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988), vii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> John Hick, "The Philosophy of World Religions," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37 (1984): 229, doi.org/10.1017/S003693060001680X.

<sup>13</sup> Hick, "Preface," viii.

In a curious twist, Herbert McCabe has argued that pluralists have rejected the Christian doctrine “because it is found incompatible with the European way of life in the second half of the twentieth century.”<sup>14</sup> Based on this one-sided cultural view, the pluralist team has concluded that the Christian view of Christ’s incarnation is a “myth.” However, this conclusion begs the question as it makes one culture the basis for validating belief. Christian belief transcends human cultures, and the European culture of any century lacks the wherewithal to set new standards for Christian confessions. Was the faith of the saints before our contemporary time in vain?

Again, the question is whether it is appropriate and justifiable to consider the issue of incarnation purely from the contemporary humanistic cultural concerns or from the original biblical revelation. If the idea of God incarnate is offensive in contemporary times, so also was it in the Hebraic and Hellenistic cultural times, which explains why some Messianic Jews never accepted Christ and the Greeks also considered the death of the divine person on the cross foolishness (1 Cor 1:23). The ever-abiding offensive character of the gospel shows that it transcends all human cultures of all times.

Advocates of pluralism have sought a compromise of the Christian faith to accommodate adherents of other religions. Whether this compromise is offensive to the Christian God, who has given his own revelation to his people, does not bother them. One can appreciate the relational concerns of pluralism. However, the problem with its agenda is its insistence on denying what makes the Christian identity unique before any meaningful dialogue can happen.

Hick tries to justify his perspective that “one has to show how religious faith, so far from being an arbitrary projection of our desires, may be a proper response to the deeper ambiguities of human existence.”<sup>15</sup> The question is, if the traditional understanding of Scripture arose out of the “arbitrary” desires of the older saints, how do we know whether the agenda of pluralism is not guilty of similar “arbitrary” desires as it seeks to dismantle the crux of the Christian life?

Furthermore, his project is “to reformulate the doctrine of the incarnation” because the classical version is a “mythic expression of the experience of salvation through Christ ... set in opposition to the myths of other religions as if myths were literally true-or-false assertions.”<sup>16</sup> By qualifying the beliefs of religions as myths, which by definition are not realities that can

<sup>14</sup> Herbert McCabe, “The Myth of God Incarnate,” *New Blackfriars* 58.687 (1977): 350.

<sup>15</sup> John Hick, “Preface to the First Edition,” *God and the Universe of Faiths*, ix.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, x. He restates this in John Hick, “The Logic of God Incarnate,” *Religious Studies* 25 (1989): 409.

be absolutely believed, Hick is, in effect, destroying the entire concept of religion—and not just the Christianity he seeks to compromise.

Again, he discredits the relevance of the “incarnational language” for today as being “ancient” and out of tune with the contemporary spirit.<sup>17</sup> He also questions both the language of Scripture and its process of interpretation:

It was also probably virtually inevitable that in the course of time this poetry should have hardened into prose, a metaphorical son of God becoming the metaphysical God the Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. This was of a piece with the literal understanding of the Bible during the same period.<sup>18</sup>

This is an implicit refusal to accept the internal witness of Scripture concerning its inspirational source and testimony to Christ. However, Hick produces no evidence to show that scriptural language or its interpretation metamorphosed into “hard prose”; he simply stands on probability or speculative assertion, and his point fails the integrity test.

## 2. *Paul Knitter*

Knitter also argues for a reinterpretation of Christology that moves away from the classical position. In his third thesis, he states, “The uniqueness of Jesus’ salvific role can be reinterpreted in terms of truly but not only.”<sup>19</sup> This is a glaring example of the perspectival inconsistency that accrues when the established meanings of words and concepts are deliberately subjected to fluidity. The concepts of “uniqueness” and “but not only” cannot go together unless the word “uniqueness” loses its accepted meaning. The same irreconcilable understanding follows when he says, “Christians must announce Jesus to all people as God’s universal, decisive, and indispensable manifestation of saving truth and grace.”<sup>20</sup> This statement appears to be consistent with the traditional christological method, but he contradicts himself: “While Christians can imagine that God may have more to reveal to humankind than what has been made known in Jesus, they cannot imagine that such a revelation would contradict the central ingredients of the truth they have found in Jesus.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Hick, “Preface to the First Edition,” xi.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Paul F. Knitter, “Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus,” in *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter*, ed. Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Knitter, “Five Theses,” 8; see also, K. P. Aleaz, “Paul F. Knitter’s Proposal for Relational Uniqueness of Jesus,” *Indian Journal of Theology* 40.1–2 (1998): 41.

<sup>21</sup> Knitter, “Five Theses,” 9–10, cited in Aleaz, “Knitter’s Proposal,” 41. Aleaz argues that this inconsistency arises as Knitter was trying to explain what he meant by the indispensability of Christ with respect to universal salvation in response to Hick’s critique.

K. P. Aleaz admits this inconsistency by concluding that Knitter is “simultaneously an exclusivist and a pluralist,” which is a logical impossibility.<sup>22</sup> In the fourth thesis, Knitter explains that the word “uniqueness” can be “understood and proclaimed” in terms of “human actions of love and justice,” which we can emulate.<sup>23</sup> For Knitter, Christ’s uniqueness should be restricted to his actions rather than his ontological being. But how can Christ’s actions be disjointed from his essential being? Do the fruits of a tree not derive their taste from the tree itself (Matt 7:17–18)?

It seems that to make sense of the prevailing global circumstances, relativism turns the emphasis from Christ’s uniqueness to social action. Was the apostolic message that emphasized the uniqueness and exclusivity of Christ devoid of the contextual problems we face in contemporary society? If not, what is the rationale for changing their confession to something else in our time?

### 3. Clark Pinnock

Pinnock also denies the exclusive claims of Christ in his engagement with Peter’s speech in Acts 4:12. As an inclusivist, he admits both the “finality of Jesus Christ and the boundless mercy of God for the whole human race.”<sup>24</sup> While he admits that the text contains the “incomparability of Jesus and the salvation he brings” and a “restrictivist element, a claim to uniqueness and finality,” he accuses others of overstressing Peter’s intended meaning.<sup>25</sup> In an attempt to deny the exclusivist implications of the text, he interprets Peter’s idea of salvation as being “more than vertical justification and more than deliverance from final judgment. Peter is telling people that physical healing is *part* of salvation.”<sup>26</sup> Salvation is a comprehensive category that includes healing but Pinnock does not want that comprehensiveness to include the exclusive authority of Christ to be the judge.

Pinnock’s inconsistency is quite obvious. He argues that Peter’s “concern is to be making a ringing affirmation of the incomparable saving power for

<sup>22</sup> Aleaz, “Knitter’s Proposal,” 49.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 42. Stanley Samartha similarly holds that the value of Christ is his exemplary ethical person rather than his ontic person and authority. Stanley J. Samartha, *One Christ—Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 93, cited in Valerian Noronha, “Jesus in the Context of Religious Pluralism: A Study of the Christology of Stanley J. Samartha” (STD, Catholic University of America, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Clark Pinnock, “Acts 4:12: No Other Name under Heaven,” Edinburgh Christology Conference 2002, Paper II, Theology in Scotland, 19; Paul F. Knitter, *Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 47–48.

<sup>25</sup> Pinnock, “Acts 4:12,” 20.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. (emphasis added).

life today which is available to everyone who hears the good news and places his or her trust in Jesus.”<sup>27</sup> However, he accents the universality of salvation in Christ and fails to connect it with how Peter asserts the centrality of Christ in this project as the divinely appointed “Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). Pinnock’s point is inclusivism, which makes salvation available in other religions.

His conclusion still reflects this contradiction:

I conclude that Acts 4:12 makes a *strong*, *definitive*, and *exclusive* claim about the messianic, holistic salvation which Jesus has brought into the world. It is a salvation which is *incomparable* and *without rival* and is available *only* through the name of Jesus. But the text does not say anything which would exclude from eternal salvation most of the people who have lived on the earth until now.<sup>28</sup>

What is the logic of the text making “a definitive, and exclusive claim” and not excluding anything from “eternal salvation”? Is the exclusion not implied for those who miss the salvation that is “available only” in Christ?

Pinnock defeats himself when he states that scriptural texts suffer what he terms “reader interest”: “No one is completely objective when they read texts which tackle issues that concern them greatly. They have an interest in the outcome of the interpretation.”<sup>29</sup> Since he is not exempt from this either, on what moral and intellectual grounds does he want the orthodox view of exclusive Christology to be abandoned for his own interests and that of the pluralism he advocates? How can a reader ever approach a text with no particular interest so that it can speak for itself within its narrower and wider contexts?

Though the pluralists understand this text in their own way, Stott sees Peter moving “from healing to salvation, and from the particular to the general. He sees one man’s physical cure as a picture of the salvation which is offered to all in Christ.”<sup>30</sup> Following this observation, the text portrays the uniqueness of Christ in unambiguous terms. Salvation is surely a comprehensive concept that encompasses both physical and spiritual needs, but it definitely looks to the future complete defeat of sin and its consequences for humanity, of which Peter gives hope within the authoritative redemptive framework of Christ. The insistence that Peter is silent about the situation of the heathen in the text fails to grasp the context of the entire Petrine Christology in Acts.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. (emphasis added).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>30</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006), 97.

Peter's broader contextual framework takes into consideration repentance from sin and belief in Christ as the only way to salvation: "And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38). Note that Peter was responding to the people's question in the previous verse: "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). In other places, too, Peter tells the people the same thing: "Repent, then, and turn back, so that your sins may be wiped away" (Acts 3:19) and "God exalted him to his right hand as Prince and Savior, to grant repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel" (Acts 5:31). This is a clear allusion to God's redemptive work for the fallen human condition.

## **II. Stott: *The Incomparable Christ***

The task of being a Christian apologist in the context of rising religious pluralism is herculean. Stott admitted that contemporary Western culture finds the Bible incompatible with itself and that he also felt the grip of the "tension between these two worlds." He confessed to resisting the extremes that have prevailed among Christian leaders and scholars, who either choose to ignore the realities that we face or "twist God's revelation in search of relevance." To be faithful, Christians are not to live above the word of God but to live under its authority and guidance as they engage with the issues of the world around them.<sup>31</sup> Should the concern for relations with other faiths necessarily compel us to concede the exclusive claims of Christ? Stott stood firmly on the ground that Christians should maintain their own unique identity but approach relational dialogue with a sense of humanity and humility.

Regarding the relational concerns, Stott refers to a statement of the World Council of Churches thus: "A Christian's dialogue with another implies neither a denial of the uniqueness of Christ, nor any loss of his own commitment to Christ, but rather that genuinely Christian approach to others must be human, personal, relevant and humble."<sup>32</sup> The point here is that it is implausible for pluralism to suggest that Christians should lose their basic identity while engaging in dialogue with other religions when those religions do not lose their own. Some religious scholars who also promote dialogue have agreed: "Both [Christianity and Islam] take their

<sup>31</sup> Stott, *Issues*, xii.

<sup>32</sup> Stott, citing the World Council of Churches assembly at Uppsala, report 2, paragraph 6, in John Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 109.



Scriptures seriously.”<sup>33</sup> The basic thrust of this reality is that all believers of scripture-based religions take their religion’s scripture to be their principal authority. If this is the case, then scholars of pluralism mischievously want to rob Christianity of its source of power in favor of other religions. Also, the question of dialogue does not necessarily imply the absence of differences because “true dialogue does not seek to avoid or to evade differences.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the pluralists’ insistence that Christians give up on their exclusive claims to establish a relational dialogue is absurd: those exclusive claims make the difference between Christianity and other religions.

The defense of the divinity of Christ is a crucial characteristic of Stott’s writings, and it is what has shaped his Evangelical identity. He asserts, “It is my very loyalty to Christ which requires me to hold evangelical views.”<sup>35</sup> This statement is a direct challenge to the failure of some Evangelicals: “It is perhaps the incarnation which we evangelicals have tended to neglect most, in both its theological significance and its practical implications.”<sup>36</sup> On this christological matter, it is apparent that Stott stands in sharp contrast to N. T. Wright, also an Evangelical scholar. Wright admits that the questions concerning Jesus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have led him to develop a new agenda, that is, “to go deeper into the meaning than we have before and to come back to a restatement of the gospel that grounds the things we have believed about Jesus, about the cross, about the resurrection, about the incarnation, more deeply within their original setting.”<sup>37</sup>

Stott confronts Wright for his indecision and self-contradiction about the divine claims of Christ: Wright acknowledges that Christ performs the divine functions of Messiah and YHWH and yet denies his divine self-consciousness.<sup>38</sup> Wright argues that the truth of Jesus’s salvation is primarily woven around the history of the Jews and their climactic expectations, which is how the concept of the kingdom of God was understood in

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<sup>33</sup> Mohammed Abu-Nimer and David Augsburg, introduction to *Peace-Building by, between, and beyond Muslims and Evangelical Christians*, ed. Mohammed Abu-Nimer and David Augsburg (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010), xi.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> John Stott, *But I Say to You ... Christ the Controversialist* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 202.

<sup>36</sup> Stott, *Issues*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>38</sup> John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 122, citing N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 90; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 2:653; see also N. T. Wright, “Jesus and the Identity of God,” originally published in *Ex Auditu* 14 (1998): 42–56, <https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/jesus-and-the-identity-of-god/>, 13.

first-century Jewish thought.<sup>39</sup> Wright asserts that history is part of God's creation, but his explanation undermines the transcendental element of the kingdom of God. Further, he states, "It is not difficult, I believe, to establish that Jesus of Nazareth believed himself to be Israel's Messiah, but this tells us nothing about whether he believed himself to be in any sense identified with Israel's God."<sup>40</sup> While he performed YHWH's duties, according to Wright, Jesus "never 'knew he was God' in the same sense that one knows one is tired or happy, male or female."<sup>41</sup>

This is an outright denial of Jesus's knowledge of his divine identity.<sup>42</sup> It contradicts any cogent thinking about how the self-conscious messianic identity and the activity of YHWH in Jesus would still fail to point to Jesus's self-conscious divine identity, which no other greater Jew, including Moses, claimed.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the comparison between the quality of Jesus's self-divine consciousness and the other aspects of human reality is problematic because of the qualitative difference that is involved in such comparison.

Stott ponders, "How could he [Christ] advance these claims to divine authority and action and not believe that he was God?"<sup>44</sup> To deny Jesus's self-recognition as God and argue that he did not point to himself but to God is highly dubious and theologically unsound.<sup>45</sup> Wright's position betrays or twists the meaning of the abundant scriptural testimonies to Jesus's divine self-consciousness. To this, Stott replies, "But there *is* evidence for the deity of Jesus—good, strong, historical, cumulative evidence; evidence to which an honest person can subscribe without committing intellectual suicide."<sup>46</sup> He argues further that the "biblical vision of God profoundly

<sup>39</sup> Wright, "Jesus and the Identity of God," 13.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>42</sup> See also Austin Stevenson, "The Self-understanding of Jesus: A Metaphysical Reading of Historical Jesus Studies," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 72.3 (2019): 298, doi:10.1017/S0036930619000346.

<sup>43</sup> Various scholars have ably demonstrated that the Jewish messianic and "Son of Man" concepts referred to a divine being; see J. Gresham Machen, *The Person of Jesus: Radio Addresses on the Deity of the Savior* (Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2017), 28–29, repr. from *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947); Shirley Lucass, *The Concept of the Messiah in the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity*, LSTS 78 (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), ch. 7; Iain M. Duguid, "Old Testament Hermeneutics," in *Seeing Christ in All of Scripture: Hermeneutics at Westminster Theological Seminary*, ed. Peter A. Lillback (Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2016), 22; R. E. Clements, "The Messianic Hope in the Old Testament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43 (1989): 3–19.

<sup>44</sup> Stott, *Incomparable Christ*, 122.

<sup>45</sup> See Samartha, *One Christ—Many Religions*, 93, cited in Noronha, "Jesus in the Context of Religious Pluralism," 2.

<sup>46</sup> John Stott, *Basic Christianity* (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 14.

affects our attitude to society, since God's concerns inevitably become his people's too."<sup>47</sup> If this is the case, and since God would not want a compromise of his revelation and glory, why would scholars of pluralism want Christians to give up their belief in the deity of Christ for the sake of pleasing others? Why should Christians, whose identity is in Christ and their lives raised and hidden in him (Col 3:3), dishonor him by denying who he is essentially?

Stott took all the claims very seriously and defended them. Indeed, since Christ was neither insane nor an impostor, he could not have made audacious and authoritative claims that properly belong exclusively to God if he indeed were not God.<sup>48</sup> But if Jesus was the Son of God in human flesh, then we must submit to his authority and teaching, in which case our opinions and views must be held in subjection to him.<sup>49</sup> It is a recognition of who Christ is and what he came to do that shapes the purpose and goal of Christian missions in the world.<sup>50</sup> Once we reject this allegiance, we have no business even calling ourselves Christians.<sup>51</sup>

Stott's starting point for articulating his views on the divinity of Christ is assent to the classical Christian consensus that Scripture, which has revealed Christ, is itself divine in character as the word of God. As the authoritative word, by virtue of its divine origin, its authority is above that of church traditions, and thus its statements about Christ are also final and worthy of all trust.<sup>52</sup>

However, we might ask, "How can we come to know the authentic Jesus for ourselves—this incomparable Christ who has no peers?"<sup>53</sup> Stott proposes that God has given us Scripture, to which we must keep returning if we are to know Christ more.<sup>54</sup> Now, Stott dwells on Scripture's own witness to Christian religion and not on what other religions say about their view of salvation and that the authenticity of Christianity does not depend on the

<sup>47</sup> Stott, *Issues*, 50.

<sup>48</sup> John Stott and Stephen Motyer, *Men with a Message: An Introduction to the New Testament and Its Writers* (Suffolk: Three's Company/Angus Hudson, 1996), 75; Stott, *But I Say to You*, 203–4; *Basic Christianity*, 31–47. Stott here echoes C. S. Lewis in his book *Basic Christianity*, which is a build-up on the argument made by C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Bles, 1952), 24–37; see Alister Chapman, *Godly Ambition: John Stott and the Evangelical Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 38.

<sup>49</sup> Stott, *But I Say to You*, 204.

<sup>50</sup> Stott and Wright, *Christian Mission*, 141; Stott, *Incomparable Christ*, 16; *Contemporary Christian*, 356–74.

<sup>51</sup> Stott, *But I Say to You*, 206–7.

<sup>52</sup> Stott, *Incomparable Christ*, 15, 250.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

assertion of others or human traditions.<sup>55</sup> If other religions lack a similar declaration, they cannot be used as yardsticks for assessing the biblical claim. Therefore, he employs the force of the expression of the authentic Christian stand on this matter, namely, “We must continue to affirm the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ.”<sup>56</sup>

But beyond the question of Scripture, why is Jesus unique? Stott argues, “Since in no other person has God become human, died, been raised from death and been exalted to heaven, there is no other savior, since no one else possesses his qualifications.”<sup>57</sup> Christ’s qualifications from birth to death and resurrection stand him out among his competitors.

From Romans 1:3–4, he explains that the resurrection confirms the uniqueness of Jesus rather than conferring it upon him: Paul contrasts Jesus’s two stages of ministry as “son of David” and “Son of God” and confirms his uniqueness.<sup>58</sup> God did to Christ what he has not done to any other religious founder or leader: he raised him from the dead and “set him at his right hand in the place of supreme honor, far above all conceivable rivals.”<sup>59</sup> This action places Christ over the entire cosmos as the Lord. Furthermore, if the “Christian good news is *the gospel of God*,” this is tied to no one else but Christ because he is the “substance of the gospel” and the “gospel of God is the gospel of his Son.”<sup>60</sup> The contrast between the son of David and the Son of God exposes “this unique person, seed of David and Son of God, weak and powerful, incarnate and exalted, ... *Jesus* (a human, historical figure), *Christ* (the Messiah of Old Testament Scripture), *our Lord*, who owns and rules our lives.”<sup>61</sup>

The most astounding scriptural warrant for Christ’s exclusive self-claim in the gospels is Matthew 11:27, where he says, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and *no one knows the Son except the Father*, and *no one knows the Father except the Son* and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (ESV, emphasis added). It is very clear that “the Son” is used here in the absolute sense.<sup>62</sup> Scholars have pointed out that Jesus’s deity

<sup>55</sup> Stott, *But I Say to You*, 66.

<sup>56</sup> Stott, *Radical Disciple*, 21.

<sup>57</sup> Stott, *Incomparable Christ*, 34. He reiterates this idea in *The Message of Acts*, 97; *Radical Disciple*, 21–22; John Stott, *Balanced Christianity* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 13. See also Timothy Dudley-Smith, *Authentic Christianity: From the Writings of John Stott* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 47–49.

<sup>58</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Romans* (repr., Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 50–51.

<sup>59</sup> Stott, *Incomparable Christ*, 66.

<sup>60</sup> Stott, *Message of Romans*, 47–48.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*, ed. John Stott (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 140, n. 6. Other scholars confirm this interpretation; see, e.g.,

was recognized by many and varied observers: the people at his baptism and transfiguration (Mark 1:11; 9:7); the devil during his temptations (Matt 4:3, 6; Luke 4:3, 9); demons who trembled at his presence for fear of their destruction (Mark 3:11; 5:7; Matt 8:29; Luke 4:41; 8:28); the centurion at the crucifixion (Mark 13:32; Matt 24:36); and prophesying angels (Luke 1:32–33, 35).<sup>63</sup> Christ stressed that it takes God to know God and that this knowledge is absolute.<sup>64</sup> Christ made it explicit that our knowledge of God is not the same as his own knowledge of the Father. While his own knowledge of the Father is absolute and exhaustive by virtue of his essential being as God together with the Father, our knowledge of the Father is secondary and relative, coming through Christ to us at our creaturely level as he chooses to reveal the Father to us. The nature of Christ's knowledge of the Father is mutual and comprehensive; based on this reality Christ expresses in John 14:9, "He who has seen me has seen the Father; so how can you say, Show us the Father?" Though he came to inaugurate the kingdom of God, Christ called people *to himself* to follow him several times (Matt 11:28; 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:27; 16:24; 19:21; Mark 8:34). It should also be noted that scriptural "passages which predicate humanity of Christ assert its truth, but do not deny his divinity."<sup>65</sup>

One can argue that the centrality of Christ is the reason for the division of human civilization into BCE and CE since his birth, and he has impacted all great personalities after him. For this reason, it can be attested, "There is nobody like him; there never has been, and there never will be."<sup>66</sup> It is this all-surpassing reality that "Jesus Christ is too great and glorious a person to be captured by one author or depicted from one perspective."<sup>67</sup>

In the ocean of pluralist challenges that make some Evangelicals uncertain of what they believe, Stott did not flinch on the question of the deity of Christ and its functional implications: "We are not ashamed of Jesus Christ, who is the centre and core of Christianity."<sup>68</sup> Christ exhibited an "incomparable character" manifest in his "strength and gentleness, his uncompromising

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Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (repr., London: SCM, 2000), 255, and Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 288.

<sup>63</sup> Simon J. Gathercole, *The Pre-existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 273, 277.

<sup>64</sup> Green, *Message of Matthew*, 141.

<sup>65</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 291, topic 3, q. 28, 34.

<sup>66</sup> Stott, *Incomparable Christ*, 18.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>68</sup> John Stott, *Why I Am a Christian* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 35. See also *Basic Christianity*, 31.

righteousness and tender compassion, his care for children and his love for outcasts, his self-mastery and self-sacrifice,” which the whole world acclaims.<sup>69</sup> The denial of the deity of Christ leaves Christianity empty and meaningless and without any compelling reason for missions and the quest for human transformation: “If Jesus was not God in human flesh, Christianity is thoroughly discredited. We are left with just another religion with some beautiful ideas and noble ethics; its unique distinctiveness is gone.”<sup>70</sup> While Knitter tries to elevate the actions of Christ above his ontic person, Stott cogently correlates both realities, richly informing our intellectual and moral conduct in the most constructive way. Our faith must direct our actions, and our actions must match our faith. For the gospel to be whole, we must not only affirm Christ’s divinity but also put into action this faith and his agenda. The functional finality of Christology is the translation of our belief in Jesus as the Son of God who came to save us and establish the kingdom of God on earth and also to cause us to enact actions that will make a difference in human society.<sup>71</sup>

The contextual necessity for the advent of Christ was the human rebellion against God and the broken relationships within humanity that Christ came to restore.<sup>72</sup> Sin is the reason for the centrality of the cross, as he argues:

For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone; God accepts penalties that belong to man alone.<sup>73</sup>

The fact of human sin is what is missing in non-Christian religions; hence, they miss the overarching importance of the divine action in Christ in response to this human condition. However, it follows that sin created the scenario in which the cross became necessary and that Christ chose the cross as the means to rescue us and disclose the love of God and overcome evil, thus making the cross central in the redemptive project.<sup>74</sup> The problem of human sin is of such magnitude that it could only be addressed by the most qualified person, who is none other than Christ, the God-man. It is our belief that his finality gives authentic impetus to the proclamation of

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<sup>69</sup> Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 14, 49.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>72</sup> Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 11; Stott and Wright, *Christian Mission*, 97.

<sup>73</sup> John Stott, *Cross of Christ* (repr., Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 159.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

the good news to the world.<sup>75</sup> The crux of the message is that “Christianity is a religion of salvation” because Christ came to save sinners (1 Tim 1:15).<sup>76</sup> For Stott, there is an authentic Christianity that is opposed to the diluted version of liberal pluralism.<sup>77</sup> That authentic Christianity is defined by the biblical portrait of Christ, who is the author of salvation.<sup>78</sup>

The centrality of Christ in the context of sin defines the centrality of the cross. It is central because of him who died and what his death accomplished for humanity. His manner of death, and the reason for his death, makes him stand out.<sup>79</sup> Knowing the full value of Christ’s sacrificial death, which the apostolic tradition amplifies, made Paul boast in nothing except the cross as God’s chosen means to accomplish the extraordinary redemption from sin and its present and future consequences.<sup>80</sup> By the achievement of redemption on the cross, Christ has obtained justification for us; this is the foundation of the Christian faith.<sup>81</sup> The cross has revealed something of God that has not been revealed in any other way, namely, the Father’s love and justice, which is expressed through the suffering of the Triune God.<sup>82</sup> The cross has shown that God can substitute himself for those who have offended him and require just punishment from him, and this transaction is an expression of undeserved love. By the cross, God has rescued us, revealed himself to us, and graciously overcome evil with his love.<sup>83</sup> Aligning with Jürgen Moltmann’s statements on God’s love in the cross, Stott notes, “No theology is genuinely Christian which does not arise from and focus on the cross.”<sup>84</sup> The unity of God was expressed in a dramatic way on the cross, where “the Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of

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<sup>75</sup> Stott and Wright, *Christian Mission*, 108.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>77</sup> Dudley-Smith, *Authentic Christianity*, 159; John R. W. Stott, *Understanding Christ: An Enquiry into the Theology of Propositions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981). Stott amplifies this view more in his commentary: John Stott, *Lausanne Occasional Paper 3: The Lausanne Covenant; An Exposition and Commentary* (Lausanne: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1975), 14.

<sup>78</sup> Dudley-Smith, *Authentic Christianity*, 9.

<sup>79</sup> Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 27.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 37, 40–41.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>82</sup> Stott, *Why I Am a Christian*, 57.

<sup>83</sup> Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 165.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 211; see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1974), 72.



the Father.”<sup>85</sup> The cross also reveals the unfathomable wisdom and power of God.<sup>86</sup>

Unashamed of the gospel like the apostle Paul (Rom 1:16), Stott saw the necessity of comparing the incomparable and drawing the conclusion, incorporating it in the title *The Incomparable Christ*: “There is nobody like him; there never has been, and there never will be.”<sup>87</sup> Christ has influenced ideologies and great world leaders after him rather than them being his rivals or equals because of who he is essentially, the divinity that has permeated the human world to reform it.<sup>88</sup>

### III. *Self-Substitutionary View of Atonement*

Stott argues for a Christology of divine self-substitution, a theory of the atonement in which the substitution was God for God, not God for man.<sup>89</sup> The gravity of sin against the majesty of God has set the framework for understanding the nature of the atonement, where the self-satisfaction of God as an “inward necessity” was key.<sup>90</sup> The substitution was a penalty for our sins in which God the Father and Jesus both voluntarily took the “initiative together to save sinners.”<sup>91</sup> Like Barth,<sup>92</sup> Stott is apparently conscious of the challenge of violence or child abuse in this interpretation of the atonement. Obviously, saving sinners cannot only be from their sin but also from its consequences, including eternal punishment, even as Stott accepts that the substitution was a penalty for our sins.

The question that John Calvin tries to answer is who could qualify as our mediator to pay the penalty for our sin, since our finitude disqualifies us in the context of the gravity of our sin and the requisite satisfaction of divine justice. And he says, “Our Mediator must be true God and true man.”<sup>93</sup> For

<sup>85</sup> Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 212, citing Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 152, 243.

<sup>86</sup> Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 219–22.

<sup>87</sup> Stott, *Incomparable Christ*, 18, 176.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. Stott demonstrates how Christ has influenced many great leaders to live their own lives too; see Stott, *Incomparable Christ*, 133–73.

<sup>89</sup> Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 133.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 143, 151. Stott finds irreconcilable the concept of a loving God unleashing severe punishment on anyone, let alone an innocent person like Jesus (Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 151, 158–59).

<sup>92</sup> See Bruce L. McCormack, “The Ontological Presuppositions of Barth’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 364.

<sup>93</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, LCC, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.12.1, 1:464.



Calvin, despite God taking the sole responsibility to provide the solution, man must necessarily be involved because he committed the crime for which he has to pay. Yet God was also going to satisfy himself. So the solution must be in a God-man; the justification is thus established:

Since neither as God alone could he feel death, nor as man alone could he overcome it, he coupled human nature with divine that to atone for sin he might submit the weakness of the one to death; and that, wrestling with death by the power of the other nature, he might win victory for us.<sup>94</sup>

Stott echoes Calvin but goes beyond him: “Neither Christ alone as man nor the Father alone as God could be our only substitute. Only God in Christ, God the Father’s one and only Son made man, could take our place.”<sup>95</sup> Though Stott strongly defends Christ’s divinity elsewhere, his language here rather implicates Christ’s divinity as if it is the involvement of God that raises his divinity to qualify for our substitute.

Stott seems inconsistent. This inconsistency is even more visible in his Trinitarian view, which he did not fully develop in his writings. In his earlier publication, *The Cross of Christ* (1986, reprinted last in 2006), his explanation of the substitutionary death of Christ got him into the Barthian modal trajectory, where he argues that “the righteous, loving *Father* humbled himself to *become* in and through his only Son flesh, sin and a curse for us, in order to redeem us without compromising his own character.”<sup>96</sup> The fact of the Father becoming the Son in the flesh (modalism) questions the integrity of the distinct personalities in the Godhead. This view stands in opposition to the orthodox position and is contra Calvin, who maintains that it was distinctively the “Son of God” as the second person in the Trinity who became “the Son of man”<sup>97</sup> and not the Father who became the Son, who eventually became man. And when Calvin further avers that “our most merciful *God*, when he willed that we be redeemed, *made himself* our Redeemer in the person of his only-begotten Son [Rom.5:8],”<sup>98</sup> he is emphasizing the unity of the Triune God in the redemptive project.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.12.3, 1:466.

<sup>95</sup> Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 159.

<sup>96</sup> Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 158–59 (emphasis added). Apart from adopting the Barthian idea, he clearly references him. See Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 159, note 51, and Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol.4:2, ed. G. W. Bromiley, T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 94; *Church Dogmatics: Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 2. (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 359–60.

<sup>97</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.12.1, 1:465.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

However, in a later publication, *The Contemporary Christian* (1992),<sup>99</sup> Stott apparently moves away from his earlier view, as he references the plurality of the persons in the Trinity: “And if the *three persons* of the Trinity are committed to their welfare, how can we not be also?”<sup>100</sup> And later, in *The Message of Romans* (1994), Stott explains how synonymous it is to refer to “being in the Spirit” with the “Spirit in us” and the “Spirit of God” with the “Spirit of Christ” but warns against applying the same to the Triune God:

This is not to confuse the *persons* of the Trinity by identifying the Father with the Son or the Son with the Spirit. It is rather to emphasize that, although they are eternally distinct in their *personal* mode of being, they also share the same divine essence and will. In consequence, they are inseparable. What the Father does he does through the Son, and what the Son does he does through the Spirit. Indeed, wherever each is, there are the others also.<sup>101</sup>

It is very clear in this text that Stott underscores the three persons as distinct, self-conscious modes of being.

## Conclusion

Stott was writing at a time when the consciousness of religious pluralism was growing, a time in which the gospel of Christ had gone to the ends of the earth, confronting other religions not as *an* alternative but as *the* alternative in its comprehensive mode as “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Unlike the period from the early church to the sixteenth century, when missiology was marginal, Stott defended the claims of Christ in the context of competitive religions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Stott presented his understanding of the authentic Christ not from philosophical, psychological, and anthropological grounds but from the internal witness of Scripture as the revelation from God. The foundations of his Christology are the claims and actions of Christ. The ontological person of Christ was essential to Stott because he saw the magnitude of the human problem, sin and its consequences, from which only God can save people. God’s judgment of sin is so great and dreadful that only God himself can deliver man from it. Therefore, God himself must act, and Christ must be God if he is to save. This understanding takes into consideration the whole biblical picture of the precosmic Christ, who was cocreator of the universe

<sup>99</sup> Stott, *Contemporary Christian*, 148, 284.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>101</sup> Stott, *Message of Romans*, 225 (emphasis added). Note that Barth opposed this usage. See also John Stott, *The Message of Matthew* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 323.

with the Father and the Holy Spirit and has come as the Redeemer. This core Christian gospel warrants a constructive missiological dialogue between Christianity and other religions. However, his view on penal substitution went beyond orthodoxy owing to his inconsistent Trinitarian position.



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