

The Three Tests of Authentic Christianity, Doug Hayhoe, March 2024

The apostle John's first letter gives us three tests of Christianity, as relevant today as when he wrote them.

John Stott died in July 2011 at the age of 90 (Figure 1). Those of us now seniors thought he would be around forever! He was always there, a strong leader of evangelicals around the world, an excellent Bible teacher and expositor, and a dedicated advocate for the stewardship of God's creation.

Stott had a lifelong love for God's two books, nature and Scripture. He expressed this in both actions and in words, in his writings on [the creation care of nature](#), for example, as well as in his many Scripture commentaries. The first of these that I read was Stott's [The Letters of John](#). In this small book, Stott explained that the apostle John, in his *First Letter* ([1 John 1-5](#)), laid down three tests of authentic Christianity: faithful obedience, compassionate love, and true belief.

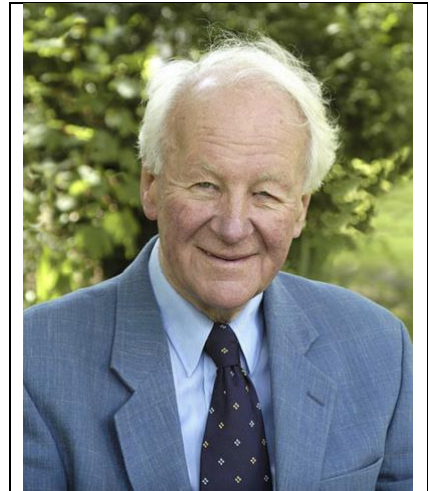


Figure 1 Rev. Dr. John RW Stott, [Photo owned by Langham Partnership International.](#)

The true basis of Christian fellowship

John's letters were written at the end of the first century of Christianity, when many heresies and divisions had come into the Christian church. People claimed to have new life, but didn't show its results. False teachers traveled around, expecting to be received into local Christian fellowships (1 John 2:18-22; 2 John 7-11). Thus, the apostle lays out the basis of Christian fellowship in his first chapter, before he gets into his three tests.

The well-known statement, "Christianity is Christ," is how the apostle begins his letter. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" (1 John 1:1). He is describing Jesus Christ here, especially the risen Christ. After Jesus rose from the dead, he invited his disciples to "touch" his hands and his side, so they could see it was really him (John's Gospel 20:20, 27). The apostle is probably reflecting back on this, in his letter.

He then continues, "We proclaim to you the eternal life [i.e., Christ Jesus], which was with the Father and has appeared to us ... that you also may have fellowship with us" (1 John 1:2-3.). Authentic Christian fellowship with other believers must involve a correct belief in the person of Christ. He is the Son of God, the true "eternal life." Christian fellowship is both horizontal, with other believers, and vertical, with the persons of the Godhead. Thus, the apostle continues, "our fellowship is *with* the Father and *with* his Son, Jesus Christ" (v. 3).

Fellowship has a condition, however: "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another." This is because God's very nature is light (vv. 5-6). Of course, none of us is perfect. Sin often comes in and spoils our fellowship. So, the apostle adds, "the blood of Jesus, his son, purifies us from all sin" (v. 7). The apostle is not encouraging us to continue in sin (1 John 1:8-10). Rather, when we do sin, "we have an advocate" (1 John 2:1-2).

In the remaining four chapters, the apostle then emphasizes three tests of Christian fellowship.

The moral test of obedience

[William Tyndale](#) played a key role, in the 16th century, in translating the Bible into the language of the English People (Figure 2). He also wrote [The Obedience of a Christian Man](#). He wanted people to know that attending church by itself does not reflect the essence of being a Christian. Rather, God has established “true duties” for each individual Christian to obey, beyond that of participating in religious ceremonies.

The first test that the apostle John gives us is the *moral test of obedience* (using John Stott’s words): “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands” (1 John 2:3). People who openly disobey God in living immorally can’t be authentic Christians. The apostle actually calls them liars! “The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar” (1 John 2:4). In Scripture, disobedience, of course, doesn’t just refer to sexual immorality. But that is one of the things, no doubt, that the apostle had in mind.

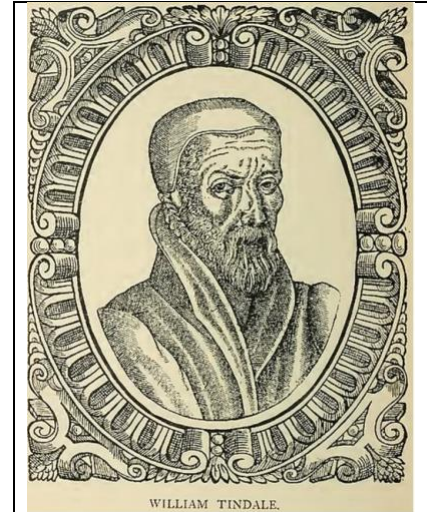


Figure 2 16th century engraving of William Tyndale, from [Theodore Beza's](#) *Icones*

The test of obedience goes beyond just obeying explicit commands. If we have received a new life in Christ, we will not only “obey his word” (1 John 2:5), we will “live as Jesus did” (2:6). A spirit of obedience, not just the letter of the law, is what the apostle is talking about.

This focus on moral purity and obedience is emphasized again in the third chapter: “everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure ... No one who lives in him, keeps on sinning ... no one who is born of God will continue to sin” (1 John 3:3, 6, 9). The reality of our conversion to Christ and confession of sin that resulted in God’s forgiveness (1 John 1:7), will be shown by a change life. The false Christians in the apostle John’s day were missing that.

The social test of love

The moral test of obedience leads into the *social test of love* (again, in John Stott’s words), for the one new command that Jesus gave his disciples was “to love one another, as I have loved you” ([John’s Gospel 13:34](#)). John’s Letter builds on this in its second chapter: “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness” (1 John 2:7-11). Again, in the third chapter, “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him” (1 John 3:15). And, again, in the fourth chapter, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20). In fact love is mentioned 25 times in 15 verses of John’s Letter ([1 John 4:7-21](#)). God’s great love for us should motivate us to love others.

How can we do this? John tells us! “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” (1 John 3:17). There were lots of famines in the early Christian era. The first Christians took collections and shared with those suffering in faraway places (See [Acts 11:27-30](#); [2 Corinthians 8](#)). Likewise, today, we can share with believers in need in other places through charities such as *Compassion*, *Food for the Hungry*, *Living Water*, *Samaritan’s Purse*, *Tearfund*, and *World Vision*. We can also just look around us – the poor, recent immigrants, refugees, or those suffering tragedies.

The doctrinal test of belief

The final test is that of belief, especially what we believe about Christ. “Who is a liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist ... he denies the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22). The false teachers who didn’t fully believe in Christ in the apostle’s day were even called antichrists (1 John 2:18). Their teaching about Christ was so defective that they had to leave the fellowship of the apostles: “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us” (1 John 2: 18). John repeats this test in the fourth chapter: “Every spirit who confesses Jesus Christ come in flesh is of God” (1 John 4:1-6). The person of Christ, His true humanity as well as His full deity, is the touchstone of Christian belief and fellowship.

Are there other essential Christian doctrines, as well, that we need to believe in to be a true Christian? Yes, indeed! I once took several days to go through the Bible tabulating those Christian teachings that were taught or mentioned over 100 times. Table 1 is the result.

In Biblical times, authors weren’t able to use bold, or underline, or use italics. And, so, frequency of mention became one indicator of importance.

Table 1 Essential Beliefs of Christianity (mentioned 100+ times each)

- The nature and attributes of God, including the Trinity
- God as Father, loving, accepting and caring for us as his children
- The Lordship of Christ, including His deity, as God’s Son
- The Cross of Christ and His resurrection
- Salvation from sin and a new life by faith alone
- The Holy Spirit, active in believers, the church, and the world
- The inspiration and authority of God’s Word in our lives
- The existence of angelic beings, of Satan, and of demons
- The sinfulness of man and our accountability to our Creator
- The importance of Christians showing true love for each other
- The necessity of obedience and holiness in the believer’s life
- The importance of prayer in our individual and collective lives
- The second coming of Christ to bring human history to a climax

(This list isn’t exhaustive. There may be other important teachings occurring 100 or more times in the Bible that we need to believe in.)

We can’t imagine a true believer rejecting any of the points in Table 1.

Conclusion

The three tests of authentic Christianity are tightly woven together, in the second, third, and fourth chapters of John’s First Letter. They can’t be separated. The fifth chapter, then, begins by showing that all three are a result of new birth:

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God [*doctrinal test of belief*], and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well [*social test of love*]. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands [*moral test of obedience*].” ([1 John 5:1-3](#)).

These three tests of authentic Christianity can’t be separated. True conversion to Christ results in true Christian living. So, let’s not be fooled. If we don’t pass all of these tests, we’re in trouble!

Credit: This paper is largely based on John Stott’s *The Letters of John*, although I’m not aware of any direct quotations.

Note: The paper is a shortened and updated version of a 1997 article published in *Grace & Truth* magazine.