

Critical Commitment

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 March 1992

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Well, it's great to be with you. I'm sorry this isn't next week in the light of that elaborate introduction, but the least you can do is, you know, get a trailer of what's happening next week. So, Dave, would you stand up and wave at everybody?

It's nice to see you here. Is anybody here that we should introduce?

I mean, or you would like to say something to the group that you feel? Yeah. Oh, all right. I'd like to introduce my brother, Dick Walker from Portland, Oregon, my sister and my sister, and my sister.

My brother ministers to the jailhouse. And they've been praying for me for quite a while. Nice to have you.

Are you glad he introduced you? Oh, that's good. I thought you knew me already. Everybody knew me. Well, this is the third session on this one story of the Ethiopian eunuch who was traveling on the road down from Jerusalem back home to the upper Nile where he lived.

[1 : 32] And where he was a very high-ranking sort of cabinet minister in the government.

And he had been to Jerusalem, which was a very mysterious thing for a man to have traveled so far and to be, as everybody supposes, a black man and interested in Jewish faith.

Jewish faith had a lot of credence among people in those days because of its high moral stature. You know, when you start with the Ten Commandments, you start fairly high.

And so a lot of people respected just the basic morality of Judaism and became interested in it and interested in the scripture. And how this man related to Judaism, we don't know, except that he traveled a very long way to take part in the festival in Jerusalem.

He also had purchased what must have been an extremely expensive manuscript of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah, and he was sufficiently devout that even though he couldn't understand it, he was reading it carefully, trying hard to understand it, which is where most people have to start with the Bible.

[2 : 59] And they need help with it, and they find it difficult. And he found it difficult. And it was only on the way home that he had Philip run along beside his chariot and ask him if he understood what he was reading.

And he said, how can I, unless somebody show me? And then he showed, he expressed his need for help.

Most of us are too proud and arrogant to express our need for help. But because we, I mean, intellectual arrogance is very difficult stuff.

And, you know, when you ask people to join a Bible study, they generally say no, not because they know all there is to know about the Bible, but that they know how little they know and don't want to be exposed in a Bible study group.

And not knowing whether Genesis is in the front of the book or the back of the book. And so it's nice and refreshing to meet this Ethiopian eunuch who says, how could I understand this unless somebody helps me?

- [4 : 07] And then they sat and they read the passage from Isaiah, which we talked about last week. And he concluded it by saying, of whom does this speak?
- Does it speak of the man who wrote it or of someone? And then you have that lovely line in there, which is a famous line through all Christendom, I say, all the whole Christian community is beginning from the scriptures.
- He told him the good news of Jesus. And so in that way, it's like the Luke 24 passage where Jesus himself walked home on the road to Emmaus with two strangers and they wanted to know why he was so ignorant of what was going on in Jerusalem.
- And he, beginning from the scriptures and from Moses, told them all the things concerning himself. So that the kind of vital point that needs to take place in people's lives is this encounter with the person of Jesus Christ in the written record.
- Because that's basically how we encounter him. A lot of us in our religious instincts might prefer to encounter him in some other way. But it's bending over, sort of bowing your head to the scriptures and reading and being instructed, submitting to instruction, that you come to understand what it's all about.
- [5 : 39] And having explained to him the good news of Jesus, the man notices that they're coming by a pond of water and he says, what hinders me to be baptized?
- And they both got down off the chariot and they went down into the water. And ever since the great theological question has been, how far down?
- But it remains unanswered. They went down into the water and he was baptized.
- Well, you have that wonderful story. And there's some things about it that I want you to look at in terms of the text.
- In verse 36, which is the first verse on the text that you have on the sheet. By the way, at the bottom when it says, in preparing these talks I have found John Stott's commentary, the spirit, the church, and the world, a help and commend it to you.
- [6 : 48] That was Ruth Matheson that put all that down. I was trying to let on that I knew all this stuff just by... But... Actually, after a while, I get feeling very guilty when people think I'm very clever.
- I'm only clever enough to read John Stott. And you too can be clever enough to read John Stott and study this passage with the help he gives in his commentary.
- So I thought you should have the name of the commentary that I've worked from primarily. So there you have the story of him coming down, saying, here is water, what is to prevent my being baptized?
- And it's wonderful because when the, you know, the gentleman in Acts chapter 10, Cornelius, the Roman centurion, the Holy Spirit fell on him and those assembled with him.
- And Peter asks a similar question. Can anyone refuse water that these people may be baptized? There's all sorts of...
- [7 : 59] The church, you see, has been quite embarrassed by indiscriminate baptism. And it's interesting that in the scriptures, they worry about whether or not a person should be baptized at this particular moment or not.
- And so he says, he asks the question, what is to prevent my being baptized? Well, what is to prevent him being baptized was explained in verse 37.
- Now, you look at the text and you see that verse 37 is boxed by itself. You all see that? And the reason is that it's not in the original.
- Any good Orthodox Christian knows that this is the barrier, that you've got to hold up to people, that they really have to come to faith and they shouldn't be baptized until they've come to faith.

But that doesn't appear in the original text. Now, when you look at your authorized version, you may find that it's there.

[9 : 10] But the difficulty is that the authorized version doesn't have the whole story. And it's since the authorized version was written that that has been deleted from most texts so that if you're working in a new international version or an RSV, you won't find verse 37.

It just isn't there. And just to explain to you a little bit of why that is, there's apparently 5,000 very early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament or parts of it.

And among these, there's a major manuscript, which is in the Vatican Library. There's a major manuscript. I think there's two major manuscripts in the British Museum.

There's one major manuscript in the Library in Cambridge. And these manuscripts, for the most part, have been discovered since the authorized version was written.

For instance, the manuscript, which is called, I think, Sinaiticus, is in the British Museum.

[10 : 29] And it was found by a gentleman named Tischendorf. It was discovered in 1844 in St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai.

It's believed to have been written down between 325 and 350 A.D. It was purchased by the British government from the Russians in 1933.

And it's one of the manuscripts by which New Testament scholars are constantly at work and have been, particularly now, because they have way more manuscript evidence now than they've ever had in history, trying to see how authentic the writing of the New Testament is.

And whether what it says in the New Testament that you read is what was there when it was written. And so they have this, they compound all this manuscript evidence in terms of putting it all together to try and make sure they have it.

Now, the interesting fact about that is that from the very beginning, one of the primary things that Christians did was to gather around and listen to the scriptures being read.

[12 : 06] That was, I mean, they were able to portray in carving and in pictures and things, something of the New Testament story.

But the fundamental activity of sitting down with the scriptures in front of you was, from the very beginning, one of the primary functions that Christians did together.

And they still need to do that. Now, it's interesting, and by this I don't mean to malign the Muslims, but they are called the people of the book.

And the reason they're called the people of the book is because the book is the revelation of the word of God through the prophet Muhammad to them, written in Arabic, and it's to be read in Arabic.

And it's to be obeyed for no other reason than that it's the word of God. You don't have to have a reason to obey it.

[13 : 15] You obey it because it's there. So the kind of literal obedience to the word as it is written is why they are described as the people of the book.

Christians are also described as the people of the book sometimes because of the central place of the scriptures in the Christian faith.

But with Christians, the reason that they gathered around to read the book was that through the written word, they would encounter Jesus Christ, the living Lord.

That was what was to happen. And in the encounter with Jesus Christ, the living Lord, they would discover God had made a commitment of himself to them, unconditional commitment of himself to them.

And they found in that discovery a desire to make an unconditional response to God. And that was by reason of having read the scriptures, in the scriptures encountered the person of Jesus, and experienced the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

[14 : 37] And that's how Christian life is lived, with the written word, the living Lord, and the abiding spirit. Those three things seem to come together.

And that's why in the early church, it was very important to have a copy of the scriptures. And that's why it was the business of scribes to keep writing it out.

And so that this group over here could have the scriptures. And this group could have the scriptures. And this group could have the scriptures. All sorts of people would have the scriptures. And from very early on, there were translations from the Greek into Coptic, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian.

When you hear about Armenia today, it's good to remember that in Jerusalem, the Armenian church considers itself to be the original church.

And they have the ancient scriptures in their language. So that the distribution of the scriptures to the various groups required a lot of copying.

[15 : 49] And in the course of copying out the scriptures, some people became what you might say either wiser than the scriptures and decided to do a little editing or make a few additions to it.

And I can quite well see as a minister in the church that to add to the scriptures verse 37 is a very good idea.

Good, solid church teaching. The strange thing was, when I sat down today, before this all started, the good lady next to me looked at verse 37 and said, do you think you can believe with all your heart?

I don't know. But I could have said to her, but I didn't. I wanted to save it for this moment. I had to say to her that, well, that's not in the text anyway, so I don't have to explain it.

But I am... But while it may not be in the text, it certainly is the focus of baptism, and it's what you might call an example of the teaching of the early church.

[17 : 10] Because they found that the teaching of the New Testament by itself didn't really help to organize the church as well as they thought it should be organized or to set up the appropriate barriers to baptism so that there wouldn't be something indiscriminate happening.

And in the minds of most Christians, it's still true that they think most other Christians don't understand baptism. So you can see that this problem has been going on for a very long time and the necessary conditions that are required.

But it's a fascinating story of how in the course of copying out this scripture, at some point, verse 37 got added to try and put a little reinforcement around the story and to make sure that somebody wasn't baptized indiscriminately.

So that's how that got in there. Well, having been persuaded that... Philip being persuaded that this man had heard and understood the good news of Jesus, and he must have asked for baptism because in preaching the good news of Jesus, he must have talked about baptism.

That was part of it. And so that would be the reason that he would ask if he could not, in fact, be baptized.

[18 : 47] So they went down into the water, and there it happened. There's a lovely... There's a lovely story in one of Chuck Colson's books about him being in a prison somewhere.

You may know where this story is. I couldn't find it, but I remember reading it, where some inmate of a penitentiary who had committed his life to Christ and understood the gospel as God's commitment to him, and he was full of the joy of the Holy Spirit, and he went to Chuck Colson as he walked across a prison yard and said, I want you to baptize me now.

And Chuck was embarrassed, apparently, by this, and nevertheless, the man was so insistent that he brought a bucket of water, poured it over his head, and baptized him in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Now, that's probably how baptism should be done, largely. But what it represents, as far as I can see, is that intrinsic to the gospel is the necessity of baptism.

baptism. Dick Lucas, who's the rector of St. Helen, says you've never seen a baptism until you've seen a Jew baptized, simply because it is such a costly thing to do.

[20 : 27] And the Jewish mission in Toronto, years ago we used to visit there quite a lot, and one of my friends there, who was Jewish and who had been baptized as a university student into the Christian faith, his family had actually had a funeral service for him.

As far as he was concerned, they were concerned he was dead and gone. And, you know, the difficulty that we have as Anglicans with baptism is that most people think that it's joining the culture, you know, it's becoming part of the community.

In that sense. But there's another sense in which it is submitting to humiliation in the faith of Christ, who submitted to humiliation on the cross.

So that it's not a question. The Ethiopian eunuch illustrates this. It's not a question, I don't think, of hearing the good news of Jesus.

That's a very dangerous thing to do, unless it leads to baptism, unless there is response.

[21 : 50] And I guess in our culture and in our society and at this stage in the world's history, a lot of people have heard something about the gospel, but have never made that commitment of response to the God who has committed himself to us in Christ.

That's why I think Billy Graham is a great man. Because whatever he does, at the end of it he says, come down to the front, do something.

Now, he really should baptize them, but he would get in a lot of trouble if he did. So he has worked out a little sort of evangelistic sacrament of signing names and doing things like that.

But it's an act of public commitment to being a believer in Jesus Christ. And for that reason, it is an appropriate response to the teaching of the good news of the gospel.

So I don't know what you can do to get around it. It's occurred to me that there is a waterfalls just out here as part of the decor of the landscape next door.

[23 : 08] And that ideally what we should do is at the end of each Wednesday session, I should go out and stand by the waterfalls and any of you who want to come, you come and I'll put you under.

Simply because of this strange necessity of commitment, which seems to be part of the preaching of the gospel. It's a very dangerous thing to get to the point where you can hear the gospel and yet not respond to it.

Because I think the whole process breaks down when that starts to happen. You know, that... And so, I mean, I think it's very dangerous to go to church on Sundays unless there is some kind of response from your heart to what you have heard.

Because it's not a response to the preacher. It's a response to the God who has revealed himself through the scriptures in the person of Jesus Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

And so when you come to the end of this story, you find that the last verse says, Philip was found in Azotus. That is, he went his way and he preached the gospel.

[24 : 37] He was committed to that mission. And that was what his life was all about. While the Ethiopian eunuch went on his way rejoicing.

Now, that rejoicing occurs again and again in the New Testament, in the Acts of the Apostles, as a response to baptism.

As a kind of evidence that you have not only in your mind heard the gospel of Jesus, you not only have understood God's commitment to you in the giving of his son to die on the cross, you have made your response to him and said, yes, that's it.

That's for me. And I think we do ourselves an enormous amount of damage by listening to the gospel and not responding to it.

I mean, I think that's probably the hardest part of my job as a minister, is dealing with people who've heard the New Testament stories all their lives.

[25 : 51] So that, you know, in a church like the one I serve, people tend to think that what is being taught is that you have your children baptized and they go to Sunday school and then they're confirmed and then they're married and they're communicants and they keep going and they keep giving and then they die and are buried and they have gone through the process and their hope of heaven is that they have been more or less, the less being that the minister was a kind of a kook, but more or less they've gone through the process but would be embarrassed to be asked.

Have you ever committed your life to Jesus Christ who has committed himself to you? And so it happens again and again in my experience that when you ask people to respond, they need to.

And many people are extremely grateful. I've taken lots of missions in Anglican churches and Anglican churches that are committed to the process and you tell the minister that after the service you're going to ask people to come forward if they're interested in making a commitment of their life to Jesus Christ.

He says, don't do that. Because you might interrupt the process. But you see, the process has to be interrupted.

Not by me. But the process of your life has to be interrupted. You have the dramatic story of how Paul, who was very involved in a highly religious process, which he had known from his youth and read in the scriptures and studied and done everything, but one day the process had to be interrupted and a light above the brightness of the sun struck him down off his horse.

[27 : 57] He fell on the ground and Christ himself said, Paul, why do you kick against the pricks? And he was led away from that scene blind.

And one of the disciples went to him, put his hands on his eyes, restored his sight to him. Then do you know what he did? He baptized. You see, because there is that kind of moment of commitment.

Now, most people associate that moment of commitment as moving from the slob that you are now to a model of moral virtue.

No. You have to be reminded that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And the qualifications you need are the acknowledgment that you are one and that as such you commit yourself to the one who committed himself to you in the cross.

And your baptism is a death to self. And it's a new beginning. And it's a new beginning which is nurtured by the word that's written, by the community of disciples in which you learn and are taught and by the indwelling presence of God's Holy Spirit.

[29 : 25] Let me pray. Our God and Father, we thank you that Jesus Christ was not ashamed to die.

and we thank you that you call us by your word and by your spirit not to be ashamed of Jesus Christ and to be prepared to publicly acknowledge our faith in him.

Give us grace that we who have been baptized may be given a new sense of not being ashamed, a new sense of the joy of the abiding Holy Spirit.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.