

Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century. By John R. W. Stott.

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T. Scott Christmas.

In this classic work, John R. W. Stott, author of Basic Christianity and Director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, builds a convincing case that “preaching is indispensable to Christianity.” In his preface to the book, Michael Green states that the work is aimed “to go through both the head and heart to the will” (p. 8). Stott justifies the writing of another book on preaching by stating that the distinctive element of this work is the attempt to bring together several complementary aspects of the topic, which have often been kept apart (p. 9).

The author divides the work into eight, easy-to-read chapters. In Chapter 1, he opens a door to the past and remembers the glory of preaching by giving a historical sketch. He begins with Jesus, the Apostles, and the Fathers. Stott explains that the place of preaching and teaching was so prominent in the ministry of Jesus and His Apostles “that it is hardly surprising to find the same emphasis on it among the early church fathers” (p. 18). Continuing on with the Friars and the Reformers, the author recounts eloquently the role of the pulpit with men such as Francis of Assisi, John Wycliffe, Thomas More, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Hugh Latimer. Next, the Puritans and Evangelicals are remembered. Stott walks the halls of history, recognizing such greats as Richard Baxter, Cotton Mather, John Wesley, and George Whitefield. The chapter is

filled with rich quotes from these great men of old. He closes the chapter by bringing the reader through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, recognizing the great preachers of those times.

With that panorama of preaching history in place, the writer devotes Chapter 2 to the contemporary objections to preaching. His purpose is “to try to uncover the roots of the contemporary disenchantment with preaching” (p. 50). He does so by looking at the three main arguments that were advanced against preaching: the anti-authority mood, the cybernetics revolution, and the loss of confidence in the Gospel. As he does this, the author gives response to each. Of particular help in combating the anti-authority mood is the writer’s recommendation to practice “dialogical preaching.” Stott describes a silent dialogue, which should develop between preacher and hearers. The preacher is encouraged to make statements, which provoke questions in the minds of the people, and then proceed to answer. The preacher answers in a manner which raises further questions, to which he again replies (p. 61). Stott summarizes the chapter by stating:

The anti-authority mood makes people unwilling to listen, addiction of television makes them unable to do so, and the contemporary atmosphere of doubt makes many preachers both unwilling and unable to speak. Thus there is paralysis at both ends, in the speaking and in the hearing. A dumb preacher with a deaf congregation presents a fierce barrier to communication (p. 89).

In Chapter 3, the writer defends preaching by shifting into attack mode. He devotes the chapter to explaining the theological foundations for preaching. Included in these foundations are a necessary conviction about God, Scripture, the church, the pastorate, and preaching. Stott argues, “the essential secret is not mastering certain techniques but being mastered by certain convictions” (p. 92). His purpose is to convince readers of the indispensable necessity of

conscientious biblical preaching by marshaling five theological arguments which underlie and undergird the practice of preaching (pp. 92-93).

In Chapter 4, Stott argues that true sermons bridge the gap between the biblical and modern worlds, and must be equaled in both (p. 10). He explains that preaching is more than the exegesis of a text; it is the conveying of a God-given message to living people who need to hear it (p. 137). Part of the immense challenge of preaching is the ability to bridge the great chasm between the biblical and the modern world. He argues semi-effectively that a failure to do so hides the relevance of the ancient Scriptures for modern man. In the remainder of the chapter, Stott explains that this is to be done by preaching Christ as “the fulfillment of every truly human aspiration” (p. 151), by addressing Christian ethics, and by not failing to take up social and political issues. It is the opinion of this reviewer however, that one item should be kept in mind. When a particular biblical passage is described according to its proper historical background and biblical context, no bridge is needed. Today’s contemporary society will identify with it. Although the times, locations, and cultures have changed, the nature of man and character of God have not. Therefore, the contemporary society will be able to identify. Within this chapter, the author also gives excellent advice on how to handle controversial questions from the pulpit. He concludes by describing the way to Christian maturity.

In Chapter 5, the author sounds the call to study. He begins by walking the reader through a suggested approach to necessary Bible study. He continues by encouraging the reader to be a student of the modern world as well. Reading and resource groups are recommended as a

great help for understanding the secular mind. Finally, he concludes by explaining sure hindrances to study.

In Chapter 6, Stott takes up the subject of preparing sermons. The reader is encouraged to follow the six stage process of choosing the text, meditating on it, isolating the dominant thought, arranging the material, adding the introduction and conclusion, writing down and praying over the message. Although every preacher has his own method, Stott reasons, “we can learn from one another. As Erasmus once rather playfully said, ‘If elephants can be trained to dance, lions to play, and leopards to hunt, surely preachers can be taught to preach’” (p. 213).

In Chapter 7, the writer speaks to the topics of sincerity and earnestness in preaching. He defines sincerity as meaning what is said from the pulpit, and practicing what is preached when out of it. In other words, the preacher’s life must match his message. After addressing the preacher’s personal walk, Stott gives three arguments for being sincere. He then takes up the topic of the need for earnestness. Not only must the preacher do what he says, he must also feel what he says. Earnestness is the quality of Christians who care about God, His glory, His Christ, and the Christian’s fellowman who may be on the verge of destruction. After commending the reader to include both mind and heart in preaching, Stott speaks to the subjects of humor in the pulpit and the appropriate length of sermons.

Finally, in Chapter 8, Stott sounds the call for the need for courage and humility in preaching. He supports his call for courage by remembering the tradition of courageous preaching, and by explaining the need to comfort and disturb. The writer underscores his point

by explaining the value of systematic exposition. The chapter is concluded with a clarion call for humility. Stott writes, “Pride is without doubt the chief occupational hazard of the preacher. It has ruined many, and deprived their ministry of power” (p. 320). Without humility, one cannot submit to the Word of God. Without humility, one cannot preach for the glory of Christ.

Without humility, one will not preach in the power of the Holy Spirit. Stott writes:

A humble mind . . . a humble ambition . . . and a humble dependence . . . –this is the analysis of a preacher’s humility which we have made. It indicates that our message must be God’s Word not ours, our aim Christ’s glory not ours, and our confidence the Holy Spirit’s power, not ours (p. 335).

One of the great strengths of this book is that it is such easy reading. Usually works of this caliber can be quite heavy. However, this is a joy to read. The style is smooth and easily understandable. Stott writes with the knowledge of a scholar and the humility of having often been seized with “communication frustration,” that is, the inability to communicate effectively the message that burns within the messenger. Both of these characteristics attractively flavor his message. Although Stott is extremely gifted in the area of preaching, he never conveys an air of pride. From the introduction forward, he manifests the personal humility needed to write such an impacting work.

Throughout the book, the author evidences himself to be incredibly well read on his subject. Not only does he include a well selected bibliography at the end of the work, but he frequently refers to the authors, remarking on their keen insights. His far-reaching knowledge of preaching provoked this reviewer to become better read on the subject.

Another strength is his helpful commentary on the distinction Dodd makes between preaching and teaching. He writes, “No doubt his (*Christ’s*) preaching was more evangelistic in purpose and his teaching more systematic in character, but it is not clear that the one was entirely distinct from the other in content; probably they overlap considerably” (p. 122). Stott sees much ministry of the word as both exhortation and instruction, with an element of evangelistic proclamation (p. 124).

His chapters on the call to study and the preparation of sermons are as motivational as they are mentoring. His method is straightforward and easy to follow. His advice is that of a seasoned veteran, the advice for which many young preachers long.

The book as a whole is extremely practical. Although the author clearly understands that the situations and circumstances surrounding each preacher are tremendously varied, he still believes his ideals to be universally true. Stott reasons persuasively:

With all these diversities, very much remains the same. We have the same Word of God, the same human beings, and the same fallible preacher called by the same living God to study both the Word and the world in order to relate the one to the other with honesty, conviction, courage and weakness (p. 11).

One of the few weaknesses of this work is the author’s endorsement of women serving in positions of leadership within the church, including the office of pastors or elders. It is understood that extended argument for his position is not the goal of this work. However, the reason given as support is poor. Stott reasons that pastoral oversight should be exercised by a team of:

ministers-and I believe women as well as men, although the New Testament indicates that their roles will not be identical. There is immense value in the team concept, as I

know from experience as well as Scripture, because then we can capitalize one another's strengths and supplement one another's weaknesses (p. 121).

With all due respect, this is nothing more than subjective personal opinion, which stands against texts such as 1 Timothy 2:9-15.

If the author's justification for writing another treatise on preaching is that this one attempts to bring together several complementary aspects of the topic which have often been kept apart, then he has favorably supported his case. The work is extremely well rounded, addressing many important areas. Further, it is easy to see the selfless motive of the author. He is preoccupied with the glory of his Master. He wisely counsels his readers, "Self-forgetfulness is an unattainable goal, except as the by-product of preoccupation with Another's presence, and with his message, his power and his glory" (p. 340).

This reviewer agrees with Michael Green, in his editor's preface, that the standard of preaching in the modern world is deplorable. This work however, if read, digested, and practiced, will do much to assist in raising the standard of preaching. It is the opinion of this reviewer that this classic work serves to encourage and challenge all preachers to give themselves more fully to their high calling.