

Stott, John R. W. *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*. Eerdmans, 1982. (351 pp)

The evangelical Church has suffered a demise in preaching chiefly because her preachers have demonstrated an alarming loss of confidence in and commitment to expository preaching. Many churches suffer under preachers who not only reject expository preaching as the best way to preach God's truth, but are in many cases entertaining serious thoughts of completely jettisoning any of the traditional preaching styles/forms found in the evangelical church since the Reformation. It is not uncommon to hear of unusual and "unorthodox" means of presenting the message instead of the sermon. A new school of experts has arrived on the scene urging pastors to revamp their thinking about the place and form of preaching in weekly worship in order to be relevant. What is full blown in the present day was in seed form when John Stott wrote the book under review. *Between Two Worlds* is his answer to those questioning the value and place of preaching in the contemporary Church.

Stott was ordained as an Anglican clergyman in 1945. He began serving as an assistant curate at All Souls Church in London that same year. He was appointed Rector of All Souls in 1950 and served in that capacity until 1975. Since then he has continued as the Rector Emeritus of All Souls. He is also the founder and president of the London Institute for Christianity. A prolific writer, Stott has authored over 40 books to date among them the familiar *Basic Christianity* and *The Cross of Christ*. *Between Two Worlds* is his major contribution to the field of preaching.

Purpose and Intent

The opening paragraph of the first chapter contains the primary purpose behind Stott's book. It is worth reading in his words.

Preaching is indispensable to Christianity. Without preaching a necessary part of its authenticity has been lost. For Christianity is, in its very essence, a religion of the Word of God. No attempt to understand Christianity can succeed which overlooks or denies the truth that the living God has taken the initiative to reveal himself savingly to fallen humanity; or that his self-revelation has been given by the most straightforward means of communication known to us, namely by a word and words; or that he calls upon those who have heard his Word to speak it to others. (p. 15)

Virtually every line in Stott's paragraph has been seriously challenged by those representing the new and improved homiletic designed to be relevant and attractive to a post-modern and, in many ways, post-Christian culture. While the content and form of preaching may have been debated by the preachers of the Church throughout her history, the indispensability of preaching was unchallenged by even those who failed to practice biblical preaching. Today, the Church is assailed by those who argue the day of preaching has come and gone, and insist the Church find new and better ways of reaching the world. Preaching must give way to more relevant forms and activities. Many in this school disagree with Stott's claim that the loss of preaching undermines authentic

Christianity. They argue to the contrary claiming preaching must go for the individual to truly worship authentically. The new homileticians also reject Stott's viewpoint that Christianity is a religion of the Word revealed by God in words and suggest that giving such prominence and importance to words and speech actually hinders authentic faith. Image should replace word in worship and communication is not straightforward in the traditional modern sense but progressive, interactive, fluid, relative, pluralistic, and subjectively shaped by the experience of the hearer more than by that of the speaker or the original author of the biblical text. God no longer calls upon men to speak authoritatively for Him. Rather, the leaders of worship should serve as guides and facilitators to those seeking a subjective and experiential encounter with God on their terms and in their own ways. Stott's commitment to biblical preaching and his concern for its decline among evangelical preachers was a primary motivating factor for writing *Between Two Worlds* to defend and encourage a renewed commitment to biblical preaching.

Structure and Content

Strictly speaking, *Between Two Worlds* does not adopt either homiletics or hermeneutics as a primary focus. Stott's is most concerned to defend the central place preaching should occupy in the evangelical Church. Accordingly, his structure reflects and advances this purpose.

The Glory of Preaching: A Historical Sketch

He begins by recounting the history of preaching in the Church in order to demonstrate that up to this point in history, orthodox believers considered preaching primary in formal worship. According to Stott, this is so because orthodox believers have always understood the importance of God's revealed Word as the final authority for faith and practice. Consequently, at the heart of obedient worship was the declaring, hearing, understanding, and obedient responding to this Word. This was true in Old Testament Israel during the days of the prophets as well as in the days of Jesus and His apostles. The early Church preserved the practice of biblical preaching as is demonstrated by several important Patristic citations Stott includes in this section. Consider the following citation from a sermon preached by John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople.

One only means and one way of cure has been given us . . . and that is teaching of the Word. This is the best instrument, this is the best diet and climate; this serves instead of medicine, this serves instead of cautery and cutting; whether it be needful to burn or to amputate, this one method must be used; and without it nothing else will avail. (pp. 20-21)

This understanding of the importance of preaching was kept before the preachers of the Church in pre-Reformation times by men like Hugh Latimer who fearlessly and scathingly rebuked the preachers of his day for neglecting the Word to the detriment of their flocks. Stott includes several powerful passages from Latimer's "Sermon of the Plough" that are too lengthy to be included in this review but make valuable contributions

to the book. In short, Latimer challenged the preachers of his day by shaming them with the Devil's diligence to sow error in contrast to their laziness to preach truth. The conclusion of the sermon is a challenge much needed by the present Church.

The prelates . . . are lords, and no labourers; but the devil is diligent at his plough. He is no unpreaching prelate; he is no lordly loiterer from his cure; but a busy ploughman . . . Therefore, ye unpreaching prelates, learn of the devil: to be diligent in doing of your office. If you will not learn of God, nor good men, to be diligent in your office, learn of the devil. (p. 27-28)

Stott finishes the sketch by reviewing the lives of the Reformers and Puritans as well as the important preachers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Contemporary Objections to Preaching

After establishing the primacy of preaching in the history of the church, Stott presents several reasons explaining the demise of preaching in the evangelical Church. The following paragraph is a good summarization of his material in this chapter.

We have tried to face the three chief obstacles to preaching today. The anti-authority mood makes people unwilling to listen, addiction of television makes them unable to do so, and the contemporary attitude of doubt makes many preachers both unwilling and unable to speak. Thus there is a paralysis at both ends, in the speaking and in the hearing. (p. 89)

Theological Foundations for Preaching

In this chapter, Stott asks and answers the question, "In a world which seems either unwilling or unable to listen, how can we be persuaded to on preaching, and learn to do so effectively?" (p. 92) Stott's answers that preachers do not so much need to master old methods or devise new ones; rather, preachers must be convinced of certain theological convictions related to preaching. (p. 93) Specifically, contemporary preachers must be convinced that the living God has given an authoritative self-revelation and has acted redemptively in His world. Consequently, God-appointed men must deliver and explain that Word and those acts to men. (p. 96) Preachers must also hold a conviction that Scripture is God's written Word, that it is through this original written Word that God speaks today, and that God acts powerfully through His Word when it is preached and read. Finally, preachers must be convinced that God rules, cares, nourishes, and advances His Church primarily by means of His word. When this conviction is present, her preachers charged with shepherding and feeding her will preach that life-giving Word. A final conviction Stott advances relates to biblical preaching. In this section, Stott advances his definition and description of expository preaching as well as its role and benefit to both preacher and congregation. This section is helpful but incomplete in the opinion of this reviewer.

Preaching as Bridge Building

This chapter is the heart of Stott's book and stands as both his assessment as to why preaching has languished as well as his solution by which it might be revived. His contention is that too often preaching is either so rooted in the biblical world that it has no practical relevance to the hearer unfamiliar with that; or on the other hand, preaching is so oriented to the time and culture of the audience that the biblical world of the text is ravaged and abused by the preacher. In either case, the audience finds no benefit or real spiritual help in the sermon and so seeks to replace it with something more "relevant." What is needed, Stott contends, are preachers who are at home in both worlds and can build a bridge connecting the world of the text to the world of the hearer. In the opinion of this reviewer, Stott comes dangerously close to crossing several important hermeneutical lines in this section. Without a doubt, the preacher must seek to explain the text and its context and background in terms familiar to his audience. However, in seeking to make the text relevant to his hearers, the expositor must avoid letting the world of the audience and its need for relevance and understanding become master over the text. In fairness to Stott, he recognized and addressed this danger in the following warning:

Our bridges too must be firmly anchored on both sides of the chasm, by refusing either to compromise the divine content of the message or to ignore the human context in which it has to be spoken. We have to plunge fearlessly into both worlds, ancient and modern, biblical and contemporary, and to listen attentively to both. For only then shall we understand what each is saying, and so discern the Spirit's message to the present generation. (p. 145)

It is the latter part of this citation that most concerns this reviewer. There is no question that the preacher must explain the text and its background in ways that are understandable to the hearer. However, in "plunging into both worlds and listening attentively to both" there is the very real risk of listening to the wrong voice. The Spirit's message to this generation is not found in listening to the needs or to the "voice" of the audience and their context. Rather, the Spirit's message to this generation is solidly fixed in the world of the text. Only when the preacher plunges fearless and accurately into that world and comes back with the true meaning of the text does he have anything spiritually meaningful and profitable to say.

Summary of Chapters Five through Eight

The remaining chapters of *Between Two Worlds* address homiletical issues related to preparing and delivering biblical messages. Chapter five is an exhortation to allot a significant portion of time each week to study. Chapter six contains a brief methodology along with several suggestions from Stott's own ministry for preparing biblical sermons. Some of the material in this section is helpful but one wishes (and looks in vain) for a stronger suggestion that the preacher select a methodology of sermon preparation that is truly expository and that goes through the whole counsel of God systematically. Chapter seven addresses the ethos and pathos of the preacher by reminding him of the importance

of sincerity and earnestness in the delivery of a message. Chapter eight focuses attention on the courage and humility needed in the life and character of a preacher who would effectively build a bridge between two worlds.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Between Two Worlds makes a valuable contribution to the literature on biblical preaching. Stott's concern for the demise of preaching in contemporary evangelicalism is valid and he is to be commended for contributing a work of this nature as a corrective to the problem. The book has much to commend it beginning with the style in which Stott writes. He does not write as an academician in a world far removed from his readers. He writes as a pastor to pastors and consequently, his readers relate well to much of what he writes. He address concerns that are real and present dangers for many preachers confronted with the pressure of growing a church at the expense of preaching. Secondly, Stott includes elements in *Between Two Worlds* that are not often combined in a book on preaching. For example, he has a chapter on the history of preaching which is helpful in spite of its brevity. His content interests the reader to read further and his bibliographical citations provide good resources for further study. The material in chapters five through eight address areas frequently neglected by other works on homiletics. For example, he includes an entire chapter on the importance of study and includes some practical exhortations and suggestions designed to motivate and help preachers make adjustments in this area.

In spite of its many strengths, *Between Two Worlds* contains several significant weaknesses that confront the reader who is committed to expository preaching. First and perhaps foremost, Stott presents a defense of biblical preaching rather than of expository preaching. This is evident in his lack of a precise definition of what constitutes expository preaching. He contends that all true preaching should be expository preaching and argues that such preaching seeks to discover and bring forth the meaning of the text for the reader. He does warn the reader to be true to the original intent of the author. However, these statements are both overly general and scattered throughout the section leaving the reader to piece together his thinking on this important issue. In the opinion of this reviewer, this section would be greatly strengthened by a concise and specific definition along with its component elements that identifies what Stott means when he speaks of "expository preaching." The lack of such a precise definition gives rise to the book's second major weakness, the danger of becoming overly focused on the context and needs of the audience. Stott, to his credit, warns against this by admonishing the preacher who desires to be relevant to remain true and loyal to the biblical text. However, precisely because such a warning is necessary highlights the weakness of Stott's approach. A preacher firmly anchored in the text and primarily committed to discovering and accurately expositing the text to his audience will always be relevant. In other words, Stott argues that to be relevant, the preacher has to live in two worlds. While understanding his intent, the truth is a preacher who anchors himself primarily in the right world, that of the text, will find himself, to the degree he accurately exposits the meaning of the text, continually relevant in the other world, that of his audience. Additional comments related to this concern have already been mention in the section reviewing chapter four. Third, Stott's chapter on the theological foundations for

preaching could be expanded and grounded more firmly in specific texts of Scripture related to the importance of preaching. In a work dedicated to defending the primacy of biblical preaching, the paucity of biblical texts explained in their context is a bit disappointing. A fourth weakness may be due in part to Stott's deliberate choice to include aspects of both hermeneutics and homiletics in a work of this brevity. In *Between Two Worlds*, homiletics fares much better than hermeneutics. Finally, many of the weaknesses contained in the bridge-building concept seem to relate to the idea that the preacher must structure both the content/application and the form of his message to the needs of his audience. This fails to sufficiently take into account the Holy Spirit's role in opening the eyes of the audience when truth from the text is accurately presented. While application is important, truth and interpretation are even more so. A preacher whose primary concern is fitting the application to his audience runs the risk of doing something that the Scriptures present as the job of the Holy Spirit. This is not to be uncharitable to Stott who in places reminds the reader of the primacy of the exposition. It is simply a response to the overwhelming flavor of the book's central message – live in two worlds so that you can apply the biblical world in a relevant way to the contemporary world. Stott may not go down the path that many who push the new hermeneutic have chosen, but it is possible that the lack of appropriate cautions in *Between to Worlds* will unlock the gate to this path for his readers.