

Stott, John. *Between Two Worlds – The Challenge of Preaching Today*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. 340 pp. \$14.96

### **Introduction**

*Between Two Worlds* by John Stott is a classic book on the historical, theological, and practical aspects of preaching. The main focus of the book is on the preacher's responsibility to "build the bridge" between the ancient text and the contemporary audience. In the book, Stott explains how the preacher is to serve by taking the truths of God's word and applying them to the contemporary scene without compromising or distorting the truth.

### **Summary**

The book begins by giving a historical sketch of how preaching has served the body of Christ throughout the history of church. Stott considers preaching to be "indispensable to Christianity<sup>1</sup>." His premise is that God has through the prophets, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit thus obligating preachers to speak what "He has spoken<sup>2</sup>." After establishing the distinctive nature of Christian preaching, Stott moves from the early church accounts of preaching to the twentieth century showing in each how the emphasis and neglect of preaching had affected the life of the church.

Realizing that a historical sketch is not enough to convince skeptics to embrace preaching, Stott uses chapter two to address the contemporary objections that are raised against preaching. Those three objections are summarized as an anti-authority mood that rebels against all forms of authority, a cybernetics revolution that has been intellectually hindered by the advances and access to personal forms of technology (ie.-TV), and the church's loss of confidence in the Gospel because of the influence of modernism. Stott offers several approaches for the preachers on how to address each of the objections and how to combat their influence in the lives of those who are in the church.

Moving from the historical sketch to the contemporary objections, Stott dedicates chapter three to the theological foundations for preaching. At the beginning of the chapter, Stott notes that his desire is to "convince my readers of the indispensable necessity of conscientious biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Pg. 15

<sup>2</sup> Pg. 15

preaching<sup>3</sup>.” His approach for satisfying such a desire is taken up in five theological arguments regarding convictions about the nature of God, Scripture, the Church, the pastorate, and preaching as exposition. In these arguments, Stott presents the theological underpinnings that provide a theological foundation for preaching. The first three arguments are heavily dependent upon the premise that God is the self-revealing God who has spoken through the scriptures and has created the church by his Word. Given that preaching is to be a declaration and application of the Word of God, Stott goes on to say that, “the word of God is the scepter by which Christ rules the Church and the food with which he nourishes it<sup>4</sup>.” The last two arguments deal with both the nature of the pastorate and preaching as exposition. The pastorate is discussed as the provision of Christ to give pastors to oversee his church. As for preaching, Stott says that the only acceptable form of Christian preaching is expository preaching. By expository, Stott means “preaching that brings out the meaning of the text and exposes it to view<sup>5</sup>.”

In the fourth chapter, Stott introduces the concept of preaching as “bridge building.” The idea is that most preaching fails to “bridge” the divide between the ancient text and contemporary audience. Stott says that on many times, the conservatives tend to live in the ancient lands while the more liberal preachers live in the contemporary audience. The conclusion is that both approaches, when held in isolation, are ineffective forms of preaching. Thus, the preacher ought to strive to “bridge the gap” between the ancient text and the contemporary audience. Preaching that does this will adequately explain the text within its context and thoroughly apply it to the lives of the contemporary audience.

Chapter five presents the first part of the process of building the bridge between the ancient text and the contemporary audience by informing the preacher on how to study. The method of study that is advocated in chapter five is one that takes into consideration both worlds that are a part of the communication process. Stott comments, “If we are to build bridges into the real world, and seek to relate the Word of God to the major themes of life and the major issues of the day, then we have to take seriously both the biblical text and the contemporary scene<sup>6</sup>.” Stott

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<sup>3</sup> Pg. 93

<sup>4</sup> Pg. 109

<sup>5</sup> Pg. 126

<sup>6</sup> Pg. 180

begins with the study of God's word and then moves to the study of modern world. After considering these two aspects, Stott lends some practical suggestions to help facilitate study in both areas.

As with most homiletic books, Stott uses the next chapter to deal with the preparation of the sermon. For the most part, Stott's instructions are not much different from other works on the preaching, except for the added emphasis on the spiritual preparation of the pastor in prayer and meditation. Stott concludes the book with two chapters on the preacher's call to be sincere, earnest, courageous, and humble in the work of the ministry.

### **Critical Evaluation**

*Between Two Worlds* was an excellent read. Stott writes with great clarity and bears the marks of a seasoned scholar. From his opening historical sketch to his epilogue, my attention was engaged with the matter at hand. To say that the only legitimate form of Christian preaching is expository preaching is very bold, but is also very much needed in our day. In a day when even some of the most conservative "scholars" and most popular Baptist preachers tend to live in the modern world, Stott's call to bridge the gap between the ancient text and the modern world is prophetic. This modern world does not need more of its own philosophy and method, it needs God-besotted men that dare to bring the ancient yet relevant text to bear on the lives of the people. The only men that will be able to do such a thing will be the men who have had heeded the instruction found in books such as *Between Two Worlds*.

One of the areas that I was particular fond of was the spiritual emphasis that was stressed in the preparation of the sermon. Far too often I find myself just "going through the motions" of sermon preparation without ever taking the time to be gripped by the text and prayerfully work through it. I was thankful to be reminded again that the people will not be gripped by a text that the pastor has not first been gripped by himself.

Another aspect that is somewhat related to the preparation of the sermon was Stott's comments regarding the need for the pastor to commit to reading through the word of God each year or at least on a very consistent basis. This, too, is often a source of tension in my own life as I find myself engaged in much activity but very little communion. His statistics about taking small breaks to read were helpful and encouraging since I often find myself shirking my responsibility to read because I do not feel as though I have the time to commit to it. The statistic

helped to show me how a little reading here and there can actually turn out to be a lot more reading than original thought.

As for the dislikes in the book, some of the material is clearly dated. His discussion on TV was helpful for producing principles and guidelines, but could certainly be updated to meet the demands and challenges of the ever expanding digital world. Another area in which the material is dated is the information related to the anti-authority mood. Though the material is spot on, it would be helpful to include a discussion regarding the way postmodernism has served to expand this mood into the churches. This would not take much to revise and does not really affect my desire to recommend the book.

I also found his discussion on page 121 to be somewhat confusing and in need of clarification. Stott says,

Suffice it to say that God desires every local church to have the benefit of pastoral oversight; that this oversight should be exercised by a team; and that team should include part-time and full-time, clerical and lay, stipendiary and voluntary ministers- and I believe women as well as men, although the New Testament indicates that their roles will not be identical.<sup>7</sup>

The matter that needs to be clarified is whether or not he is advocating women elders or not. Granted, Stott says that their roles will be different; nevertheless, he does not clarify what he means here and leaves the door open for interpretation that could eventually lead to an unbiblical situation arising in the church.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I found *Between Two Worlds* to be a great resource for the preacher. The book contains a wonderful marriage of the concepts of both sermon and personal preparation for the work of the ministry. Stott's work gives the preacher not only a historical sketch of preaching but lays a theological foundation upon which his practical applications can be carried out. It is thorough, it is concise, and it is worth the read. I highly recommend it!

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<sup>7</sup> Pg. 121