

Stott, John R.W. *Between Two Worlds—the Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982. 351 pp. \$12.95.

Introduction

John Stott was born in London in 1921. His biography as recorded on www.langham-partnership.org gives a portion of his Christian testimony:

I was aware of two things. . . . First, if there was a God, I was estranged from him. I tried to find him, but he seemed to be enveloped in a fog I could not penetrate. Secondly, I was defeated. I knew the kind of person I was, and also the kind of person I longed to be. Between the ideal and the reality there was a great gulf fixed. I had high ideals but a weak will. . . . (W)hat brought me to Christ was this sense of defeat and of estrangement, and the astonishing news that the historic Christ offered to meet the very needs of which I was conscious.

Stott was converted under the preaching of Eric Nash. The text from which Nash preached was Pilate's question recorded in Matthew 27:22, "What then shall I do with Jesus, who is called the Christ?" That he needed to do anything with Jesus was a novel concept to Stott. But the preacher insisted that everyone will either reject Jesus like Pilate did, or follow and serve Him. Thus Stott began to follow Jesus. After being studying at Cambridge, he became pastor of All Souls Church in London, the church in which he had grown up. His urban ministry became a model to others, focusing on prayer, expository preaching, evangelism, follow up, and training.

Summary

Stott's purpose in writing *Between Two Worlds* was to encourage and train preachers. His thesis may be stated thus: Though we as preachers are weak, unworthy vessels, and though

preaching is challenged by objections, yet there is a glory and a heritage in preaching as we are used by God in bridging the gap between the biblical and modern worlds.

In the very first paragraph of the "Author's Introduction," Stott writes, ". . . seldom if ever do I leave the pulpit without a sense of partial failure, a mood of penitence, a cry to God for forgiveness, and a resolve to look to him for grace to do better in the future" (9). Herschael York expressed similar thoughts when he wrote,

I recall times when I have been preaching when God simply moved in and took over. . . . Those times occur when I am *most saturated with the Scripture* (author's emphasis) I am preaching. . . . But I also remember other times—the times when the burden of preaching crushed me because I was not sufficiently aware of or convicted by the sermon I preached. Feeling the weight of preaching to people who came to hear a word from God, I felt weak and afraid because I knew I had not paid sufficient attention to the text. Even if I did understand the text, I had not thought carefully how best to relate it to people. I relied on my past training rather than a current walk with God. . . . When my anemic sermon finally reached a merciful conclusion, I felt like apologizing to everyone who sat through such a pitiful presentation of God's powerful Word.¹

The author writes in chapter four ("Preaching as Bridge-Building") that preachers are town criers, heralds, sowers, ambassadors, stewards, shepherds, and workmen (135-136). They must bridge "the deep rift between the biblical world and the modern world" (138). Though they may disagree on many things, Harry Emerson Fosdick and Stott are in agreement on the need for building bridges. Fosdick states that the preacher "is engaged in an engineering operation, building a bridge by which a chasm is spanned so that spiritual goods on one side—the 'unsearchable riches of Christ'—are actually transported into personal lives on the other."²

On the issue of the primacy of expository preaching, Stott writes, "True Christian preaching (by which I mean 'biblical' or 'expository' preaching) . . . is extremely rare in today's Church" (92). He grants that others see the value of various sermon types that are not expository. Stott references "the most thorough classification of sermon types," W.E. Sangster's *The Craft of*

the Sermon, which lists three main types of sermons. Then, citing "other writers," Stott gives the menu of possibilities: topical, textual, evangelistic, apologetic, prophetic, doctrinal, devotional, ethical, hortatory, then "somewhere down the line 'exegetical' or 'expository' sermons are included" (125). Stott goes on to say, "I cannot myself acquiesce in this relegation . . . of expository preaching to one alternative among many. It is my contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching. Of course if by an 'expository' sermon is meant a verse-by-verse explanation of a lengthy passage of Scripture, then indeed it is only one possible way of preaching, but this would be a misuse of the word. Properly speaking, 'exposition' has a much broader meaning" (125). The text of an expository sermon could be just one verse, a sentence, a single word, or a whole book of the Bible. "Exposition sets us limits"—we may preach only from the biblical text (126).

By way of summary, following are some of the main points the author argues. First, we must learn from preachers of the past. Especially noteworthy is the single-minded devotion to the task of preaching that they demonstrated (Jesus in Mark 1:38; the apostles in Acts 6:4). Stott also calls attention to what Thomas Carlyle called the "lonely courage" (35) of true pastors. Carlyle especially admired Martin Luther and John Knox in this regard. Further, we must also know our times, the anti-authority mood (51), and the objections to preaching that are current in our culture so that we can respond to them in theologically sound ways. Stott argues that we must be relevant, studious, and Christ-like if we are to be used of God to preach His Word.

Critical Evaluation

The author writes, ". . . We must be careful to state the double authorship of the Bible in such a way as to maintain both the divine and the human factors, without allowing either to

detract from the other. On the one hand, the divine inspiration did not override the human authorship; on the other, the human authorship did not override the divine inspiration. The Bible is equally the words of God and the words of men" (97). Even in light of its context, I think the final sentence of the immediately preceding quote goes too far. The phrase, "the word of the Lord came" occurs one hundred and nine times in the *English Standard Version*. In all but five of those occurrences, "the word of the Lord came *to*" someone (Abraham, Samuel, Nathan, Solomon, Jeremiah, etc.). In Genesis 15:1 we read, "After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision" (ESV). Genesis 15:1 does *not* say, "After these things the word of the LORD *and Moses* came to Abram in a vision." In the book of Jeremiah we read the words, "Thus says the Lord" one hundred and forty-nine times. Never do we read in the books written by Jeremiah, "Thus says the Lord *and Jeremiah*"—which we might expect if Stott is correct that "the Bible is equally the words of God and the words of men." Furthermore, we never read in Scripture that "the word of the Lord came *from*" a human being.

Also, in Romans 16:22 we read, "I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord" (ESV). Who would argue that because Tertius "wrote" Romans, that therefore the scriptures contained in the book of Romans are equally his words and God's? I am confident that even Paul, the human author of Romans, who must have dictated to Tertius, did not believe that the scripture in Romans was equally his (Paul's) word and God's. In a similar way, just because Isaiah received and wrote the book of Isaiah, we cannot say that it was equally his word and God's. First Thessalonians 2:13 speak thus, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (ESV).

Regarding further critical evaluation, I wrote above that the author quotes unnamed "other writers" with reference to types of sermons. Those listed by Stott were topical, textual, evangelistic, apologetic, prophetic, doctrinal, devotional, ethical, hortatory, then "somewhere down the line 'exegetical' or 'expository' sermons are included" (125). I don't believe that the categories need to be thus polarized. Expository sermons need not be set over against all others. There will be overlap between the different types: an evangelistic sermon can include apologetic, doctrinal, and hortatory elements. An ethical sermon can be preached in an expository manner.

Stott says, "Evangelical Christians, who have the highest doctrine of Scripture in the church, should be conspicuously the most conscientious preachers. The fact that we are not should cause us to hang our heads in shame. If Scripture were largely a symposium of human ideas . . . then a fairly casual attitude to it would be pardonable. But if in Scripture we are handling the very words of the living God . . . God's words through men's . . . then no trouble should be too great in the study and exposition of them" (99). This might limit the value of this book in the liberal denominations where there is not usually such a high view of Scripture.

The author has more to say about prayer than most authors who write on the topic of preaching. Some books on preaching say *nothing* about prayer. Stott doesn't say a lot, but what he does say about prayer is valuable: "Biblical preaching and teaching on such topics as prayer and evangelism I take to be indispensable. . . . We can learn to pray only by praying, especially in a prayer group" (79). "The pulpit prayer before the sermon begins is (or should be) no empty formality. It is rather a vital opportunity for preacher and people to pray for one another, put themselves into the hand of God, humble themselves before Him, and pray that His voice may be heard and His glory seen" (81). Finally, Stott writes with regard to prayer and preaching, "After the writing comes the praying. Of course we prayed before we began to prepare, and we have

tried to continue throughout our preparation in an attitude of prayer. But now that the sermon is finished and written, we need to pray over it. The best time for this is the half hour before we leave for church on Sunday. It is on our knees before the Lord that we can make the message our own, possess . . . it until it possesses us. Then, when we preach it, it will come neither from our notes, nor from our memory, but out of the depths of our personal conviction, as an authentic utterance of our heart. . . . Which kind any sermon will be is usually settled as we pray over it beforehand. We need to pray until our text comes freshly alive to us, the glory shines forth from it, the fire burns in our heart, and we begin to experience the explosive power of God's Word within us" (257).

Conclusion

Between Two Worlds is valuable to me in terms of the encouragement it provides as to both who I must be as a preacher and how I must prepare both my life and my message. It is perhaps the first book I would recommend to someone wanting to enter a preaching ministry. And it is a book that I have gone to, and will go to, throughout my ministry. It is for me like a sermon on preaching.

¹Herschael W. York and Bert Decker, *Preaching With Bold Assurance* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 3-4.

²Richard Lischer, *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 400.