

Stott, John *Between Two Worlds, The Challenge of Preaching Today*, Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, U.K., William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 351 pp. \$20.00

Author's Intent:

The editor of the book, Michael Greene, summarized aptly what the intent of the work is when he quoted Stott's first five words from chapter one: "Preaching is indispensable to Christianity." The author himself addressed the question of intent in his introduction. Therein, five underlying objectives are listed indirectly. The first is made apparent when Stott shares: "I have tried to bring together several complementary aspects of the topic (preaching), which have often been kept apart" (p.9). Clearly, the intent is to offer a more complete and healthy understanding of the essential components of biblical, expository preaching. Next, an underpinning theme which speaks to intent can be found in Stott's inclusion of the following conviction: "I believe that by far the most important secrets of preaching are not technical but theological and personal" (p.10). The message sent is that there is a hierarchy to be prioritized in our attempts to learn how to become effective preachers. Stott wants his readers to realize that an orthodox understanding of the text is the foundation of expository preaching, rather than a sequential step in a methodological endeavor.

The next intent-revealing assertion offered by the author, in my opinion, also captures the crux of the book's message and value. Even the title of the book, *Between Two Worlds*, gives evidence to such an observation. In short, "Preaching as Bridge-building" is both the title of the book's chapter four, and the overarching theme of this volume. The fourth intent Stott unveils in his introduction is the belief that "We have very much to learn from the great preachers of the past" (p.10). The objective linked to such an observation is simple – we preachers need to both respect and reflect upon the lessons learned and taught by the effective teachers of the past. In this book, Stott's own instructional work on preaching, he is purposely pointing his readers back to some of the timeless truths uncovered in the past through a multitude of poignant quotes and personal insights.

The last two objectives identified in the introduction are related to the dynamic of preaching that is most closely affiliated with the preacher's audience. The first has to do with the establishment and subsequent acceptance of ideals. Stott openly admits that each situation is going to be different in terms of congregational makeup and culture, which many preachers use as an excuse for a lowering of standards, but there are certain ideals that we should all embrace as standards in our preaching. The last intent shared speaks to the expectations and responsibilities of the congregation. The author wants to ensure that his readers understand that the hearers of God's Word have two primary responsibilities in relationship to the preaching they hear. First, expect and request good preaching. Secondly, create and atmosphere and environment wherein the preacher is given the freedom and flexibility to prepare good sermons to preach.

The Book's Content:

The work begins with a chapter dedicated to highlighting the tremendous privilege and high esteem that has historically been associated with preaching. In congruence with one of the author's aforementioned intents, this section begins with the established foundation of Jesus Christ. Not only is He recognized as the focal point of the expositor's message, He, Jesus, is also introduced as a preacher. Consequently, the theological connection between preaching and Christianity is portrayed as a homogenous relationship rather than a sequential one.

Chapter two serves as a summary of preaching's antithetical advisories. Stott does a good job of describing the objections most frequently lobbied against the purpose and practice of preaching. Moreover, he has done a noteworthy job of addressing the subject in both a fair and relatively comprehensive manner. While the author's concluding opinions on the subject are obviously in the affirmative camp, in support of preaching's value and necessity in a fallen world, his description of the argument is complete enough that even those who line up against Stott in the debate mentions, would likely feel he did an adequate job defining their concerns.

Chapter three focuses on the theological aspect of preaching. Whereas Stott previously asserted the belief that there is a theological foundation for preaching God's Word, in chapter three he explains five key truths to support his conviction. In short, chapter three establishes theological axioms in regard to God, Scripture, the Church, pastoring, and preaching. While most of the book is centered on "how-to" issues, chapter three ensures that evangelical Christians have a solid grasp on the question of "why."

Chapter four is my personal favorite. Herein the author gets to the crux of what I have long seen as the biggest challenge for modern preachers. The issue of actually building the metaphoric "bridge" between orthodox theology and effective impact in a fallen world is thoroughly covered in this chapter. Stott does a great job of first pulling into the discussion and then explaining the relevance of a diverse group of bridge-building components. Perhaps his most insightful offering was the diversity of issues needed to be addressed if one hopes to become an effective bridge-builder.

Chapter five struck me as the conscious of the book. With an entire chapter devoted to the topic of the preacher's study habits, one is quickly reminded, if not convicted of the necessity to draw close and immerse themselves in God's Word. Once again, Stott did a fine job of framing the issue. He balanced the realistic challenges of the modern pastorate with practical tools that will help elevate the tensions while never lowering the standard of excellence we are all called to uphold in our studies.

If chapter four was my "favorite," chapter six was my most needed area of instruction. Stott's coverage of how to prepare a sermon paralleled the teaching lectures of our course. Together, along with our other reading assignments, the material was invaluable to me. As one who has not preached or had the privilege of even being around the sermon-building process in the past, the mechanical, application-oriented insights of

chapter six will serve as the most frequently revisited part of the book for me in the future. In essence, this chapter serves as the architectural blueprints, or perhaps better stated, the ABC's of sermon preparation.

Chapter seven marks a shift in the book's focus. While all of preaching is related to the preacher's heart, mind, and character indirectly, this chapter draws attention to the specific relationship between the preacher's character via his sincerity, earnestness, and preaching. Chapter seven of Stott's work reminds me of the book of James in the New Testament. In both cases, the primary focus is on the connection between motives and actions. Stott makes it clear that one must be sincere and earnest if he intends to fulfill the biblical calling of a preacher.

Chapter eight completes the character evaluation of the preacher by covering the Christian bookends of courage and humility. In terms of the preacher, Stott does a great job of first establishing the absolute necessity of courage and humility, but perhaps even more importantly, he goes on to show the relationship between the two traits. In a world that tends to polarize these two complementary characteristics, Stott eliminates the "either/or" perspective and effectively argues and then illustrates the dovetailing, check and balance relationship they should have in preaching.

Affirmative Contributions:

- I really liked Stott's recommendation of using "various forms of response" (p.77) to the gospel. I am familiar with the idea of different forms in terms of coming-forward, raising a hand, filling in a response card, etc. but I had never thought of or heard of offering different forms of support groups. Stott suggests having a group ready to respond to different demographics as well as different stages of spiritual maturity, and/or life circumstances. I think the better we are aligned to receive lost people (as they are), the more apt we are to connect with, and subsequently disciple them.
- I appreciated Stott's bold acknowledgment that the church's attitude toward evangelism is antithetical to Romans 1:14-16 (p.86).
- In response to the objections to preaching... "The best form of defense, however, is attack" (p.89)
- Expanding on the theological aspects of preaching, with an emphasis on the church... "A deaf church is a dead church..." (p.113).
- "A good shepherd's care of his sheep is fourfold, feeding, guiding, guarding, and healing" (p.120). I found this quote to be very thought provoking because I tend to think of the primary role of preaching as being evangelistic. This section made me realize that being a pastor is a multifaceted calling – that goes beyond, while never excluding, evangelism.

- “We should be praying that God will raise up a new generation of Christian communicators who are determined to bridge the chasm; who struggle to relate God’s unchanging Word to our ever-changing world; who refuse to sacrifice truth to relevance or relevance to truth; but who resolve instead in equal measure to be faithful to Scripture and pertinent to today” (p.144). This is the essence of chapter four. I not only agree with the statement, it resonates in me because I find myself in the fulcrum of his point.
- “It is our responsibility to teach them with clarity and conviction the plain truths of Scripture, in order to help them develop a Christian mind, and to encourage them to think with it about the great problems of the day, and so to grow into maturity in Christ (p.173). I love this quote because I think it encapsulates what I now see as a mandate for effective preaching.
- I found Stott’s recommendation to do a yearly “through the Bible” reading plan to be very helpful. While the concept was not a new one for me, the methodology, “begin with the four great beginnings of Scripture, namely Genesis, Ezra, Matthew, and Acts...”(p.183) was new to me.
- In acknowledgment of the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching and converting souls... “I shall not attempt to teach a tiger the virtues of vegetarianism; but I shall as hopefully attempt the task as I would try to convince an unregenerate man of the truth revealed by God concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment to come” (p.329).

Points of Disagreement:

I only had one general point of disagreement. Stott advocates a shared role of leadership in the church. While I recognize that he is not abrogating all responsibility of leadership to the laity, I do feel he is opening the gate a bit too far on the issue. When he speaks to laity becoming “more involved in the process of sermon making” (p.200) I think he is taking a good idea (staying in tune with your congregation) too far.

Assessment of the Value of the Book:

The most valuable contribution of Stott’s work is found in the “bridge-building” components of chapter four. I believe he has unearthed a valid and critical need in modern, evangelical preaching. Unfortunately, many preachers, congregations, and denominations ignore the chasm that the author so aptly described. Moreover, the problem grows larger, in part because very few people are willing to address the need of bridging the gap. Most are satisfied with defending the tenants of their side of the chasm. Building upon the same point, not only does Stott shine the light of truth on a dark reality in the Church, he brings with it a viable solution. Consequently, in this reader’s opinion, not only was the author’s purpose a worthy one, he accomplished his purpose with striking clarity and complete coverage.

The book is also a great contribution to the discussion of preaching. Its comprehensive use approach did a great job of putting appropriate borders around each subject it addressed. At no time did I feel a topic was skimmed over, nor beaten to death. Personally, I found the book helpful because of its inclusion of many of the mechanical elements associated with preaching. As an inexperienced seminary student, the “how-to” components will serve me well for a long time.

The book’s strengths are rooted in its willingness to tackle hard issues, cover them thoroughly, and ultimately offer solutions rather than just commentary. There is a wealth of knowledge poured into each point made, with many quotes and references included which afford the reader the benefit of applying Stott’s library of experiences to a number of the topics. On the other hand, the weakness of the book can be stated as the other side of this same attribute. At times, the breadth of Stott’s experiences and their included coverage can at times create a train of illustrations – not all of which add to the reader’s understanding of the point. The author occasionally risks dulling the attentive edge of the reader. Simply removing a handful of illustrations, based on their reiteration of a point, rather than their embellishment of it, would enhance the flow of the work.

In view of the book’s purpose, it is complete and very effective. In light of its goals, there is nothing missing from the work. In a comparative sense, Stott’s book has done the best job I have seen in drawing out the need for evangelical preaching to bridge the gap between ardent orthodoxy and liberal, outcome-oriented preaching.