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Stott's "Between two worlds, the challenge of preaching today" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Stott, J. (2017). *Between two worlds, the challenge of preaching today*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans. 267 pp. ISBN 9780802875525

John Stott is arguably a master preacher and therefore is able to analyze preaching from an insider's point of view. Although this is not a lengthy treatise of the subject, it is so full of foundational information that I found myself slowing down to re-read portions so as not to miss the message.

Starting with a historical survey of preaching starting with Jesus and moving through the ages, Stott lays the groundwork for what preaching should be. Using powerful argumentation, Stott calls for exposition of the text rather than text twisting when he quotes Professor Gustaf Wingren: "The expositor is only to provide mouth and lips for the passage itself, so that the Word may advance ... The really great preachers ... are, in fact, only the servants of the Scriptures" (p. 97).

He then examines contemporary criticisms of preaching, taking time to state the objections and then skillfully refutes those objections based upon his convictions about what authentic preaching is and what it should accomplish. Stott draws a contrast between what seems to be the two main theological groupings in today's churches. Conservatives who are biblical but not contemporary and liberals who are contemporary but not biblical. He asks an important question, "Why must we polarize in this naïve way, however?" (p. 106). He goes on to state:

This earthing of the Word in the world is not something optional; it is an indispensable characteristic of true Christian preaching ... In Scripture he (Christ) spoke his Word through human words to human beings in precise historical and cultural contexts; he did not speak in culture-free generalities. He reached down to where the people were to whom he desired to communicate. He spoke in human language; he appeared in human flesh (p. 107).

Stott calls the contemporary preacher back to the time tested and proven methodology of how to prepare and deliver sermons. Stott keeps it simple. There is the call to study not only the Bible but to reading widely of both historical and current resources as well. Stott calls for "bridge-building" between the revealed Word and the contemporary world (p. 135).

He then gives wise advice on how to prepare a sermon and finishes his treatise with calls for sincerity, earnestness, courage and humility. On the surface, that sounds like every other preaching manual but Stott seems to have a way with this topic that somehow deepens the resolve to do more, do it better and with better results.

To give an example from this book that I think truly needs emphasis, Stott quotes John Poulton who wrote a book titled “A Today Sort of Evangelism” in which the author says: “The most effective preaching comes from those who embody the things they are saying. They are the message ... Christians ... need to look like what they are talking about” (p. 210). People are looking for sincere and genuine preachers and not necessarily eloquent orators, although there is nothing wrong with beautifully crafted sermons. Preachers who live what they preach and preach what they live.

I highly recommend this book not only to those who preach but also to all those who listen, that we all will become better hearers and communicators of God’s Word.

Reviewer

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