**Between Two Worlds**

**By John Stott**

John Stott (1921-2011) was an Anglican pastor and theologian. He was one of the principal players in the crafting of the Lausanne Covenant in 1974. As such, he was well aware of the needs of the body Christ across the globe. He is the author of more than 50 books, including some of his most well–known *Basic Christianity*, *The Cross of Christ*, and *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*. He was also the director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity. He is a man passionate about preaching. Some of his works on preaching include *The Preacher’s Portrait*, *The Challenge of Preaching*, and his most seminal work on the subject titled *Between Two Worlds*.

In *Between Two Worlds*, Stott see the necessity of preaching for the growth of the Church in the contemporary situation. His book is less about matters of delivery, elocution, communication, and techniques for preaching, and more about providing a theological foundation for preaching. In chapter three, which proves to be one of the most significant chapters of the book, he provides a few theological foundations for preaching. He is also concerned with helping preachers bridge the gap between the world of the Bible and modern–day times. Though Stott addresses issues of the twentieth century, as implied by the subtitle of the book, his wisdom reverberates to preachers who are challenged by issues in a postmodern world.

Why did Stott bother to write his book? The reason, Stott writes, is because “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” (p. 15). The book is composed of eight chapters. Stott begins with highlighting the importance of preaching from both the Bible and history. Perhaps he begins the book this way because he saw the need to defend biblical preaching in his time, which in his opinion was a time riddled with an “anti–authority mood.” In other words, objections to the primacy of preaching are the direct result of the erosion of respect for authority, especially the authority of the Bible. Furthermore, two other causes contributed toward the disenchantment with preaching: the Cybernetics revolution and the influence of television.

The remedy for preaching in the contemporary context, according to Stott, is what he calls “preaching as bridge–building.” He points out that the preacher has six main roles highlighted in the Bible: herald, sower, ambassador, steward, shepherd, and workman. These include the various roles preachers perform. However, his main job is to bridge the gulf between the world of the Bible (ancient world) and the contemporary world (today). Because bridging the gap is important, Stott spends much time advising preachers on how to engage with today’s culture. In chapters four and five, he encourages pastors to engage cultural, ethical, controversial, social, and political issues head on. And the way to do it is via study. Preachers must study God’s Word as well as study the modern world (their present context).

Though the book is not meant to function as an instructional manual for preaching, Stott offers hands on practical help on how to prepare sermons in chapter six. In this chapter he decries the idea of unpreparedness. If preaching is to have primacy within the body of Christ, then it must be taken seriously. He even offers his opinion on whether or not the preacher should use a manuscript (pp. 254–256), and about the amount of time it should take the preacher to craft his sermon. Furthermore, in the last two chapters he argues for preachers to be authentic, use humor in the pulpit appropriately, watch the length of their sermons, and preach with courage and humility as they seek to employ systematic exposition.

**Critique:**

*Between Two Worlds* is a rich book for homileticians. Stott was a man aware of the times. Not only that, but Stott was also a well–read man. Each chapter contains the work of serious research and years of experience in preaching. He offers quotes from significant figures from Christianity’s past, shares his wisdom on the topic pf preaching, and speaks in a way that directly affects his intended audience, preachers. Though Stott’s approach to writing is at times too detailed, such as offering dates and contextual information for some of his illustrations, he draws his readers into the world of his book. In fact, one gets the sense that Stott aims to share all the wisdom he collected over the years on the topic of preaching into this book.

Stott’s book could have perhaps been turned into two books, with chapters one through four, which are more conceptual and philosophical in nature, and chapters five through eight, which are more pragmatic. Though Stott states his book did not intend to say much about matters of sermon delivery and preparation, he spent the second half of the book laying out a clear path for proper sermon delivery. Chapter three proves to be the most helpful chapter in the first half of the book because of its emphasis on the theological foundations for preaching, and chapter six the most helpful in the second half of the book because it is the most practical in nature. Throughout the book, however, Stott does little to address a hermeneutical approach for preaching.

Stott’s book is a helpful guide for preachers who are serious about applying the truth of Scripture to their present context. Though much of what Stott addresses in his book, in terms of technology and culture, is now outdated, he provides a window into how preachers can wisely engage with the challenging issues of their time. The remedy lies in the honest attempt to bridge the world of the Bible to the present. It lies in application of the truth for the here and now. Or in his own words, “To build bridges between the Word and the world, between divine revelation and human experience, and to relate the one to the other with integrity and relevance” (265). Like a pastor ministering to pastors, Stott encourages fellow ministers to be bold in proclaiming the truth with courage while being humble by submitting under the authority of God and his Word.

*Between Two Worlds* is an important book even for today because preachers tend to acquiesce to the needs of the day, working to please their audience rather than engaging in the difficult matters of their day. Stott is a strong advocate for an apologetic model of preaching that tis biblically rooted. It is obvious that if preachers are to bridge the two worlds that they will have to apply themselves in the same manner Stott does. His insights from men like Spurgeon, Baxter, Bonhoeffer, and others, demonstrate his commitment to serious study, which all preachers must apply. In fact, one of the most beneficial aspects are the book are the insights and quotes from different writers and theologians. Further, preachers today are challenged to think over how they interact with culture from their platforms. Books like *Preaching* by Tim Keller, He is Not Silent by Mohler, and Disruptive Witness by Alan Noble, can serve as supplemental readings to Stott’s book.

While on the one hand, one of Stott’s greatest strengths are the insights he shares from others, it can also be one of the greatest weaknesses of the book. The book at times seems like a compendium of notes versus an easy flowing train of arguments. Furthermore, though Stott believes bridge–building is foundational for preaching, he lacks on providing more vivid ways on how preachers can do such bridge–building from difficult portions of Scripture, particularly Old Testament texts, apocalyptic, and poetic Scriptures. One is left to wonder how to properly bridge the world of the Bible and the contemporary world without further instruction. Perhaps part two Jason Meyer’s A Biblical Theology of Preaching, and James Hamilton’s God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment could be helpful aids to Stott’s work. Nevertheless, his work is tremendously helpful and one of the better books on preaching to date.

**Significant Quotes:**

* “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 on him for grace to do better in the future.” (p. 9)
* I believe that by far the most important secrets of preaching are not technical but theological and personal. (p. 10)
* 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)
* The prophets of doom in today’s Church are confidently predicting that the day of preaching is over (p. 50)
* While the current mood prevails, both those making a reckless bid for anarchy and those seeking true freedom tend to view the pulpit as a symbol of authority against which they are rebelling. (p. 52)
* We need to remember the doctrine of revelation. It is a basic tenant of the Christian religion that we believe what we believe not because human beings have invented it but because God has revealed it. In consequence, there is an authority inherent in Christianity which can never be destroyed. (p. 57)
* For then it will be clear that we preach nothing to others which we do not also and first preach to ourselves, and that authority and humility are not mutually exclusive. (p. 58)
* We need to remember the dialogical character of preaching (p. 60).
* We want to provoke people to think, to answer us and argue with us in their minds, and we should maintain such a lively (though silent) dialogue with them that they find it impossible to fall asleep. (p. 62)
* I sometimes wonder if we are breeding a new gospel–hardened generation because they have been subjected *ad nauseum* not to glib stereotypes of the good news but to television pictures which have permanently damaged their mechanisms of emotional reaction. (p. 72)
* The contemporary loss of confidence in the gospel is the most basic of all hindrances to preaching. For to preach (*kērussein*) is to assume the role of a herald or town crier and publicly to proclaim a message, while to ‘envangelize’ (*euangelizesthai*) is to spread good news. (p. 83)
* The essential secret is not mastering certain techniques but being mastered by certain convictions. In other words, theology is more important than methodology. (p. 92)
* A Christian must be at least an amateur theologian before he can aspire to be a preacher. (p. 93)
* It is certain that we cannot handle Scripture adequately in the pulpit if our doctrine of Scripture is inadequate. (p. 99)
* The preacher is both a faithful steward of God’s mysteries and a fervent herald of God’s good news. (p. 100)
* More often than we like to admit, the pew is a reflection of the pulpit. Seldom if ever can the pew rise higher than the pulpit. (p. 115)
* It is my contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching. (p. 125)
* The opposite of exposition is ‘imposition,’ which is to impose on the text what is not there. (p. 126)
* Can we find a third way? Is there a way to handle controversial topics in the pulpit which is brave not cowardly, humble not dogmatic, and prudent no foolish? I think there is. It is to help Christians develop a Christian mind. The Christian mind (an expression popularized by Harry Blamires in his book of that title) is not a mind which is thinking about specifically Christian or even religious topics, but a mind which is thinking about everything, however, apparently ‘secular,’ and doing so ‘Christianly’ or within a Christian frame of reference. (p. 170)
* We who are called to be Christian preachers today should do all we can to help the congregation to grow out of dependence on borrowed slogans and ill–considered clichés, and instead to develop their powers of intellectual and moral criticism, that is, their ability to distinguish between truth and error, good and evil. (p. 177)
* 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. (p. 180)
* Since the Christian pastor is primarily called to the ministry of the Word, the study of Scripture is one of his foremost responsibilities, to which he commits himself at his ordination. (p. 181)
* The higher our view of the Bible, the more painstaking and conscientious our study of the Bible should be. (p. 182)
* If we hope to help our congregation to develop a Christian mind, we have to develop one ourselves. (p. 184)
* To begin with, we have to transport ourselves back, by the use of both knowledge and our imagination, into the biblical writer’s context, until we begin to think what he thought and feel what he felt. (p. 185)
* Here, then, are two cultural horizons, that of the biblical author and that of the Bible reader. (p. 186).
* There is no one way to prepare sermons. Every preacher has to work out his own method, which suits is temperament and situation; it is a mistake to copy others uncritically. Nevertheless, we can learn from one another. As Erasmus once rather playfully said, “If elephants can be trained to dance, lions to play, and leopards to hunt, surely preachers can be taught to preach.” (p. 213).
* Without doubt the best sermons we ever preach to others are those we have first preached to ourselves. (p. 219)
* In addition to being simple, the preacher’s words should be vivid. That is, they should conjure up images in the mind. (p. 234)
* Cicero had said in The Orator that “an eloquent man must so speak as to teach (*docere*), to please (*delectare*) and to persuade (*flectere* or *movere*).” (p. 246)
* The precise application of our sermon depends, however, on two variables, namely the character of our text and the composition of our congregation. (p. 251)
* I think that beginners will need ten to twelve hours (‘twelve hours’ work on a sermon is a good general rule,’ said Bonhoeffer), and that experienced preachers are not likely to reduce this to less than a half. (p. 259)
* The sincerity of a preacher has two aspects: he means what he says when in the pulpit, and he practices what he preaches when out of it. (p. 262)
* Nobody can be a good pastor or teacher of others who is not first a good servant of Jesus Christ. (p. 265)
* Every serious attempt to communicate requires us to put feeling into it. (p. 274)
* No hard and fast rules can be laid down about the length of sermons, except perhaps that ten minutes is too short and forty minutes is too long. (p. 294)
* Moreover, the choice between truth with unpopularity and falsehood with popularity regularly confronts Christian preachers. (p. 309)
* The fact is that the authentic gospel of the New Testament remains extremely offensive to human pride, and nobody who preaches it faithfully can expect to escape at least some degree of opposition. (p. 309)
* We must be faithful, therefore, in expounding his ‘uncomfortable words’ as well. This will mean preaching God’s wrath as well as his love, grace and mercy (indeed, these will shine all the more brightly against that ark background), his judgment as well as his salvation, hell as well as heaven (however tentative we may deem it wise to be about the details of both, in our anxiety not to go beyond the plain teaching of Scripture), death in Christ as well as resurrection with him, repentance as well as faith, Christ’s Lordship as well as his Saviorhood, the cost as well as the compensations of Christian discipleship, self–denial as the road to self–discovery, and the yoke of Christ’s authority under which we find our rest. (p. 311)
* The more we feel it necessary, especially in days of moral laxity, to dwell on the judgment of God upon sin, the more we need also to dwell on his mercy toward sinners. (p. 312)
* A century earlier John Newton, the converted slave–trader, “used to say that the point in all his preaching was ‘to break a hard heart and to heal a broken heart.’” (p. 314)
* I believe in preaching, and I further believe that nothing is better calculated to restore the health and vitality to the Church or to lead its members into maturity in Christ than a recovery of true, biblical, contemporary preaching. (p. 338)
* True, when we preach, we speak in the sight and the hearing of human beings, and they challenge us to be faithful. But how much more challenging is the awareness that we preach in the sight and hearing of God? He sees what we do; he listens to what we say. (p. 339)
* I have found it helpful before preaching to pray this prayer from the pulpit:

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence May your Word be our rule,

Your Spirit our teacher, And your greater glory our supreme concern, Through Jesus Christ our Lord. (p. 340)