BETWEEN TWO WORLDS:
THE CHALLENGE OF PREACHING TODAY

A Book Review
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Preface

The importance and centrality of preaching in the life of the church has often been maligned and downplayed throughout the history of the Christianity. In our day, it is no longer assumed that a vital part of Christian worship services should be the exposition of God’s Word by God’s man. Other things and other concerns have pushed preaching into the corner of the church’s life or worse, out of the church’s life. In his book, Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today, John Stott seeks to defend preaching in the church by citing its importance throughout the history of the church, identifying what has attacked the primacy of preaching, justifying its importance from Scripture, and describing what it is and how it is done. In his introduction to the book, Stott describes his attitude about the goal of his writing:

It is a rash and foolhardy enterprise for any preacher to preach to other preachers about preaching. I certainly do not claim to be an expert myself. On the contrary, I confess that in the pulpit I am often seized with ‘communication frustration’, for a message burns within me, but I am unable to convey to others what I am thinking, let alone feeling. And 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. At the same time, I confess to being – for reasons which will emerge in the following chapters – an impenitent believer in the indispensable necessity of preaching both for evangelism and for the healthy growth of the Church. The contemporary situation makes preaching more difficult; it does not make it any less necessary (9).

His humble conviction about the need of preaching is encouraging and challenging. Stott’s clarity on the challenges to preaching, the theological basis for preaching and the instruction about the nature of preaching are the most helpful portions of this book. Therefore, we will seek to interact with his insights in those particular areas and conclude with a recommendation for the book.
The Contemporary Objections to Preaching

After he has given an inspiring historical sketch of preaching, he continues with the modern objections to preaching. He isolates an anti-authoritarian mood, the cybernetics revolution and the church’s loss of confidence in the gospel as major opponents to biblical preaching. He first covers the anti-authoritarian mood of the age. He admits that rebellion to authority is not new in the history of the world, but he sees a movement which undermines all authority and attacks the very essence and nature of preaching. He writes cogently concerning this mood:

Thus, the minds cannot be organized and thoughts cannot be forced upon people. No institution, however venerable, has the right to impose an idea upon us by the weight of its own authority. Nor even can any idea impose itself upon us at all. For there is no such thing as truth which is absolute and therefore universal. On the contrary, everything is relative and subjective. Before I can believe any idea, it has to authenticate itself to me personally; and before you can be expected to believe it, it must become self-authenticating to you. Until this happens, we neither should nor can believe (55-56).

Stott recommends five proper responses to this movement against authority. I found one to be most helpful. He recommends remembering the locus of authority. As preachers and Christians, we must remember that we are not acting or speaking from our own authority but from God’s authority. When we act as if we are the ruler or lord, we present something that is false and make a reproach toward God.

The Cybernetics Revolution

Since the time Stott wrote this material, this particular revolution has advanced by leaps and bounds. The cybernetics revolution is a dangerous challenger against preaching as we know it. Stott defines this revolution, “the radical changes in communications as a result of complex electronic equipment” (64). Stott’s insights regarding the invention and proliferation of television and its influences are still relevant in the age of the internet, Facebook, MySpace, iPods, etc…
Stott writes over the course of several paragraphs, “TV tends to make people physically lazy. . . TV tends to make people intellectually uncritical . . . TV tends to make people emotionally insensitive . . . TV tends to make people psychologically confused. . . TV tends to make people morally disordered” (70-74). In response to these influences, the modern preacher must work hard to help his hearers. Stott’s advice for the preacher to be a visual aid for his audience and congregation is extremely important. The preacher is to be a model and set the example. This activity extends beyond the time in the pulpit to the minister’s personal and family life.

The Church’s Loss of Confidence in the Gospel

The last challenge to preaching identified by Stott is the church’s loss of confidence in the gospel. Stott describes the situation and results at length:

The contemporary loss of confidence in the gospel is the most basic of all hindrances to preaching. For to ‘preach’ (kerussein) is to assume the role of a herald or town crier and publicly to proclaim a message, while to ‘evangelize’ (euangelizesthai) is to spread good news. Both metaphors presuppose that we have been given something to say: kerussein depends on the keryagma (the proclamation or announcement) and euangelizesthai on the euangelion (the evangel or gospel). Without a clear and confident message, preaching is impossible. Yet it is precisely this that the Church seems nowadays to lack (48).

Without a conviction and trust in the power of the gospel, the church will minimize preaching and resort to other methods which are unbiblical or less effective than that of preaching. One of Stott’s responses is important if we are to recover the morale of the church. We must recognize the necessity to deal directly and honestly with the questions that people have about the gospel and Christianity. This will advance the kingdom of God and we will grow in conviction because God does give us enough revelation to be sure that the gospel can be trusted. This discussion on the challenges opposing preaching today does reveal difficulties for the modern preacher that should be honestly observed and diligently refuted. Stott continues by giving the theological basis for preaching.
The Theological Basis of Preaching

In the beginning of this portion of the book, Stott poses a question and suggests its answer:

In a world which seems either unwilling or unable to listen, how can we be persuaded to go on preaching, and learn to do so effectively? The essential secret is not mastering certain techniques but being mastered by certain convictions. In others words, theology is more important than methodology. By stating the matter thus bluntly, I am not despising homiletics as a topic for study in seminaries, but rather affirming that homiletics belongs properly to the department of practical theology and cannot be taught with a solid theological foundation. . . If our theology is right, then we have all the basic insights we need into what we ought to be doing, and all the incentives we need to induce us to do it faithfully (92).

The revelation about God and what he has called the preacher to do will be sure guides to propel us along the path of faithfulness. These major theological underpinnings of preaching are a conviction about God, which is simply a commitment to please God and have him as the center of all preaching. Second, is the conviction about Scripture which believes that God’s Word is the only sure revelation about God. A conviction about the church is also important. It believes that the church is the center of God’s activity on the earth. The last two foundations are a conviction about the pastorate and preaching which trusts that God’s emphasis on these activities and seeks to function properly in each activity. Stott’s emphasis on God and his requirement for preaching are salt in this generation and do actually motivate and empower the minister to fulfill his ministry through a faithful exposition of Scripture.

What Preaching is and How It Is Done

In the chapters 4 through 8, Stott tells the reader what preaching is and the manner it should be conducted. He first describes preaching as bridge-building:

It is because preaching is not just exposition only but communication, not just the exegesis of a text but the conveying of a message to living people who need to hear it, that I am going to develop a different metaphor to illustrate the essential nature of preaching. It is non-biblical in the sense that it is not explicitly used in Scripture, but I hope to show that
what it lays upon us is a fundamentally biblical task. The metaphor is bridge-building.

(137).

This description of preaching is helpful because the preacher must take the message of the Bible and convey it effectively to his audience for it to be advantageous. He cannot focus only on the text or the audience, but must bridge the gap between two worlds. Much preaching today stays on one side or the other and falls short of what God intends.

**A Call To Study**

Since the preacher has the difficult task of bridge-building, it will not be accomplished without hard work. Stott writes regarding the task of labor:

. . . it is our responsibility to explore the territories on both sides (text and audience) of the ravine until we become thoroughly familiar with them. Only then shall we discern the connections between them and be able to speak the divine Word to the human situation with any degree of sensitivity and accuracy. Such exploration means study. There is no doubt that the best teachers in any field of knowledge are those who remain students all their lives. It is particularly true of the ministry of the Word. ‘None will ever be a good minister of the Word of God unless he is first a scholar.’ (Calvin) Spurgeon had the same conviction. ‘He who has ceased to learn has ceased to teach. He who no longer sows in the study will no more reap in the pulpit’ (180).

It is vitally important that preachers understand the harvest principle that Spurgeon speaks of and they continue to study and learn all the days of their ministry. Unless a pastor does this, he will either be speaking words that are not from God or he will speak God’s Word in such a way that his hearers cannot discern them.

**Sincerity, Earnestness, Humility and Courage**

Much of the remainder of the book, Stott spends describing the way preaching is done. The descriptions are with sincerity, earnestness, humility and courage. Sincerity emphasizes practicing what you preach, avoiding hypocrisy and having nothing to hide. Preachers must be doing the things they are preaching to others, with the right motivations and for the right reasons. Stott describes earnestness, “is deep feeling, and is indispensible to preachers” (273). It is feeling
what we say in the pulpit. Stott adds a quote from John Pollock concerning George Whitefield related to earnestness:

His tears – and he could seldom manage a sermon without weeping – were totally unaffected. ‘You blame me for weeping,’ he would say, ‘but how can I help it when you will not weep for yourselves, although your immortal souls are on the verge of destruction, and for aught I know, you are hearing your last sermon and may never more have another opportunity to have Christ offered to you?’ (276).

Stott closes with two of the most difficult characteristics of true preaching: courage and humility. Courage is boldness and all true preaching requires boldness. The nature of the Bible’s message is such that it incites the opposition and the distaste of man. As a result, the preacher is often tempted to round off the rough edges of the gospel and only preach those things that are easily accepted by man. Stott’s reminder that courageous preaching’s goal is ultimately to comfort and not to disturb is important to remember if one desires to be faithful as a preacher. Lastly and possibly most important, the preacher must preach with humility. Stott describes why humility in submission to God’s Word is important, “Humble preachers will avoid either adding to Scripture according to their own speculations or subtracting from Scripture according to their own predilections” (322-23). Though preaching must contain more than mentioned above, these characteristics are vital to the proper delivery and acceptance of sermons.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Stott’s treatment of this subject is very helpful and productive. His insights into the modern opposition to preaching prove to be still relevant, though now advanced in their stages. His theological justifications for preaching are vital to the continued efforts of preachers in this difficult climate. The emphasis on study and delivery are very sobering and his years of practice give credence to his explanations. This book is a profitable venture for those who would like to understand how to minister in this day and age, though some terminology is
slightly dated and requires the reader to do some bridge building to apply it to our context. I would certainly recommend this book to those that aspire to have a biblical preaching ministry.