

An Interview With Rev. Dr. John R.W. Stott

by Dr. Art Lindsley

Dr. Lindsley: What are the top three needs of the church today?

Dr. Stott:

- a. The church's most basic need is to remember what kind of community it is, and in particular its double identity. For God calls his people out of the world to belong to him and sends them back into the world to serve and to witness. The first calling is to 'holiness' and the second to 'worldliness,' using the word as the opposite of 'otherworldliness,' and meaning 'involved in the life of the world.' So the church is called to 'holy worldliness' (Alec Vidler), for this is its double identity. It needs constantly to ensure that neither identity smothers the other.
- b. The church's second need is to be what it claims to be, and so to allow no dichotomy or conflict between its profession and its practice. Without this the church lacks authenticity and so credibility.
- c. In response to the challenge of pluralism, the church needs to be faithful in defending and proclaiming the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ. If it does so, it will certainly suffer for its faithfulness. If we compromised less, we would undoubtedly suffer more.

Dr. Lindsley: What legacy would you like to leave with the leaders, with whom you have been involved?

Dr. Stott: I would urge upon them the priority of preaching. It is the Word of God which matures the people of God. As Jesus said, quoting Deuteronomy, human beings do not live by bread alone, but by every word which comes from the mouth of God. Moreover, what is true of individuals is equally true of churches. Churches live, grow, and flourish by the Word of God; they languish and perish without it. Of course the Word of God can reach people both in private Bible study (if they are literate and have a Bible) and in Bible study groups. But the major way in which the Word of God comes to the people of God worldwide is through preaching. I am an unrepentant believer in the power of the pulpit. I long to see a recovery of faithful biblical preaching

from the pulpits of the world; the result would be a dramatic growth in mature discipleship.

Dr. Lindsley: Which is the most important book you have written?

Dr. Stott: I think the answer must be *The Cross of Christ*. The first reason is that the cross lies at the center of both the Christian faith and the Christian life. If pressed about my favorite verse in Scripture, I would have to say Galatians 6:14: 'God forbid that I should boast in anything except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified unto me, and I have been crucified unto the world.' The reason why the cross was central to the mind of Paul is that it was central to the mind of Christ before him.

Secondly, I have been concerned to write a book which is not just about the Atonement but about all aspects of the death of Christ as unfolded in the New Testament. For instance, Christ calls us to take up our cross and follow him. 'When Christ calls a man,' wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'he bids him come and die.' We are always in danger of trivializing the meaning of conversion as if it involved only the adoption of a veneer of piety in an otherwise secular life. Then scratch the surface and there is the same old pagan underneath. But no, conversion is much more radical than this. No imagery can do it justice but death and resurrection—death to the old life of self-centeredness and sin, and resurrection to a new life of self-sacrifice and love.

Thirdly, more of my heart and mind went into the writing of *The Cross of Christ* than into any other book. It is my 'apology,' my personal statement of faith.

Dr. Lindsley: What are the top five most influential books in your life?

Dr. Stott: Every book I read influences me to some degree, so that I find this question hard to answer. But here is my choice of five:

Revelation and Inspiration, by B.B. Warfield, a collection of essays related to biblical authority. This book is marked by the careful exegesis for which Warfield was renowned, and lays a solid foundation for an acceptance of biblical authority. The argument is compelling; I do not believe it has ever been answered.

Holiness, by Bishop J.C. Ryle. This is another collection of articles or essays, whose emphasis is that 'there are no gains without pains.' That is, although justification is by faith alone without works, sanctification is by faith and works. This book saved me from a naïve 'let go and let God' holiness teaching.

The Reformed Pastor, by Richard Baxter. I read this 17th Century Puritan classic during the week before my ordination. I was moved by its heartfelt call to conscientious preaching and to the faithful visitation and 'catechizing' of the congregation. The whole book is an exposition of Acts 20:28, in which Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders to tend God's flock which Christ has purchased with his own blood. Baxter imagines Christ saying to pastors: 'Were they worth my blood, and are they not worth your labor?'

Masters of the English Reformation, by Archbishop Marcus L. Loane gives thumbnail sketches of Ridley, Latimer, Cranmer, Tyndale and Bilney. This book helped to clarify for me the fundamental issues involved in the Reformation, and made me proud to stand in the tradition of those brave and godly martyrs for Christ.

The Christian Mind, by Harry Blamires, not only emphasizes the importance of the use of our minds in general, but in particular the need to learn to think 'Christianly.' For a Christian mind is not a mind thinking about religious topics, but a mind which is thinking about even the most secular topics from a Christian perspective. Harry Blamires bemoans the almost complete absence of a Christian mind in the contemporary church.

Dr. Lindsley: How do you shape your devotional life?

Dr. Stott: I am very grateful to the late Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, minister of Westminster Chapel in London, that about forty years ago he introduced me to the Bible reading calendar which had been produced by Robert Murray McCheyne for his people in Dundee, Scotland, in 1842. He wanted them to read the Bible through every year, the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice. It is quite an exacting discipline, since it involves reading four chapters a day. What is special about the McCheyne calendar, however, is that it begins

on January 1st with the four great beginnings or 'births' of Scripture, namely Genesis 1 (the birth of the universe), Ezra 1 (the rebirth of Israel after her Babylonian captivity), Matthew 1 (the birth of Christ), and Acts 1-2 (the birth of the body of Christ). In this way readers follow the story in parallel. Nothing has helped me more to gain an overview of the Bible, and so of God's redemptive plan. [McCheyne's Bible reading calendar can be downloaded from the FAQ section of the website <<http://web.ukonline.co.uk/d.haslam/m-cheyne.htm>>]

As for prayer, I like to begin by responding to the Word of God, turning its message into praise and prayer. I also use a number of prayer diaries produced by different Christian organizations. I also keep developing my own diary. As a pastor I naturally receive many requests for prayer. They usually refer to evangelism (people near the kingdom or newly converted), to sickness or bereavement, to people faced with an important decision in their lives, and to particular and personal situations. I keep revising these four columns as people's circumstances change.

Dr. Lindsley: How have you been so productive in writing?

Dr. Stott: I have refrained from marriage! My detractors tell me that my books are my wife-substitute, but I respond that they are a very poor substitute! Nevertheless, free from the responsibilities of a home and family, I have had more time at my disposal.

When the Bishop of London installed me as Rector of All Souls Church, he urged the vestry or church council to give me time to read and write. So the church has encouraged me to set aside time in which to do this.

Most of my books began their life as either sermons or addresses. I have found it very helpful to test material in a living situation before committing it to writing.

When I became Rector Emeritus, I was able to plan my own schedule, and for many years now I have been able to spend three months a year traveling, three months reading and writing, and six months in and around London.

In 1954 I bought a derelict farmhouse and its outbuildings near the Southwest tip of Wales, and have gradually made it habitable. It is one mile from the nearest other house, and in this privacy and isolation I have done nearly all my writing without any fear of interruption.

Dr. Lindsley: What advice have you for us in learning to communicate across cultures?

Dr. Stott: James's instruction 'let everybody be quick to listen' (1:19) is of enormous importance. In fact I believe in the valuable discipline of 'double listening' (listening both to the Word of God and to the voices of the modern world, in order to relate the one to the other).

It is a mark of our fallen self-centeredness that we assume our culture (the way we think, speak, eat, play, laugh, dress) to be the norm and other people's

the abnormal. But there is no cultural norm, and we need to cultivate the humility to learn from other people's cultures.

We are fortunate nowadays that cross-cultural travel is continuously increasing, so that people from far away may now be living in our neighborhood and attending our school, college, club or church. This provides us with a wonderful opportunity to develop deep cross-cultural friendships. Such a friendship is the best possible context in which to share Christ.

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