

SOUTHEASTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
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A BOOK REVIEW OF
JOHN STOTT, *CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THE MODERN WORLD*

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THE9940 THE MISSION AND MINISTRIES OF THE CHURCH

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Stott, John. *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1975), 191 pages. Reviewed by Jeremy P. Roberts.

Written with key principles of Christian mission to assist Christ followers in achieving biblical balance in their lives, John Stott, “. . . one of the Christian giants of recent times,” brings clarity, fairness, and constructiveness to his study on mission, evangelism, dialogue, salvation, and conversion (9). Stott, “. . . known worldwide as a preacher, evangelist and communicator of Scripture . . .” is an Englishman and former rector of All Saints Church in London. A liberal evangelical, Stott has addressed key missiologists’ gatherings including the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism and the 1975 Chavasse Lectures at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. The text being reviewed was originally prepared as lectures at Lausanne and Oxford.

Stott begins with his thesis of taking to task a cluster of five important words—*mission, evangelism, dialogue, salvation, and conversion*—and attempts to biblically define them so that relations between evangelicals and ecumenists would ease (20–21). The significant presupposition of Stott’s work is its stance on the Bible: “We find our message first and foremost not in any existential situation, but in the Bible” (42). Besides Stott’s confession in his introduction of siding predominantly with the evangelical camp, this presupposition solidifies where his allegiance lies. It is from this evangelical and biblical presupposition that Stott launches his attempt to fulfill the thesis at hand.

Overview

The structure by which Stott seeks to biblically define each of the five words is through division into five chapters: one chapter for every word being delineated. The simplicity of the text must not be overlooked. After the table of contents, a brief forward and introduction lead into the body of the text with no appendices or indices.

Mission

Stott affirms the joint partnership between evangelism and social action. Four decades ago, when the lectures in this text were initially delivered, a bifurcation in the missiological community had taken place between those who purported *mission* as being social justice, or *mission* as being evangelism. Christ's Incarnation as a humble servant being combined with his Great Commission result in what the Church is supposed to do: evangelize and serve (41–45). Stott explains the historicity of both extremes involved in this unbiblical division of evangelism by the evangelical community and social justice by ecumenists.

Stott perceives three areas of interest in seeing that *mission* involves both social action and evangelism: vocation, local church ministry, and national ministries launched by “influential central groups” (53). Stott's apparently strong passion for seeing passionate Christians entering vocations of all types—not just vocational missionary or pastor—is evident as he spends an inordinate amount of space within this chapter discussing it (48–50). He summarily expresses the pragmatic implication of biblically adhering to interweaving evangelism and social action into one's missiology—the result

of which is greater societal impact and numerical strength to fulfill the Great Commission (54).

Evangelism

Stott views evangelism as being of utmost importance to a follower of Christ (55). Within this highest priority, “. . . our chief burden should be for . . . the more than 2,700 million unreached peoples of the world” (56–57). He does not view social action as a means of evangelism, but a partner in spreading the immutable Word of God to a changing culture.

As Stott seeks to define *evangelism*, he emphasizes the importance in not associating results of converts within a definition of this oft-used word in the Christian realm (61). Instead, Stott simply defines *evangelism* in the following way:

“*euangelizomai* means to bring or to announce the *euangelion*, the good news” (58).

Stott’s definition is simply linguistic and would have benefited by using Jesus’ parable of the seeds in Mark 4:13–20 as a biblical illustration to support his point.

Dialogue

Stott’s chapter on dialogue begins with the question, “Is there room for dialogue in the proclamation of the good news (88)?” The reason for Stott’s question leads back to the beginning of his text where he expresses his desire to ease the tension between evangelicals and ecumenists. The ecumenical vein desires to “dialogue” with people of other faiths while evangelicals firmly stand against it. By “dialogue” with them, Stott refers to the ecumenical strategy of conversing with people of different religions, finding

common ground with them, and compromising the Gospel by embracing some aspects of other faiths while others embrace aspects of the Christian faith.

Stott boldly stands upon the non-negotiability of the Gospel and states it “. . . is suitable for proclamation, not amiable discussion” (90). However, such a strong stance on the Gospel should not serve as an excuse for lacking engagement with people of other faiths. Stott explains that “true dialogue” has authenticity, humility, integrity, and sensitivity (107–111).

Salvation

At the center of the tension between ecumenists and evangelicals is the meaning of *salvation*. Stott explains that salvation must not be confused with either psycho-physical healing or socio-political liberation (126, 133). The author uses a large portion of this chapter to debunk liberation theology—in particular, Gustavo Gutierrez’ *A Theology of Liberation* (137–55). Stott does not object to social and political liberation as a part of the Christian mission, but he objects to this sort of poor hermeneutic that results in believing that liberation is considered salvific.

Conversion

Conversion is not obsolete despite the contemporary distaste for it. After establishing the necessity of responding to the Gospel, Stott explains that this is called “conversion.”

Drawing upon the verb ἐπιστρέψατε, which is translated six times in the New Testament as “be converted,” Stott explains the most thorough word study of his text to further

explain conversion's requirement of repentance, its implication of membership in the Church and social witness as a result (168).

Conclusion

Stott is a giant in the missiological academic community, and this book is one of the reasons he is held in such high esteem. The author sought to define *mission*, *evangelism*, *dialogue*, *salvation*, and *conversion* in order to ease the tension between evangelicals and ecumenists. While admirably and eloquently defining each of the five words, his process of defining did little to assist in his goal of easing tension between the two polarized camps. Evangelicals can look at this text as an object of beauty and apologia while ecumenists may perceive it as more of an articulation of the view with which they disagree. Stott's goal, while admirable, is nearly impossible. He stands firmly upon the integrity of the Gospel.

From the time of the publication of this book in 1975 to the writing of this review, some of the oft-debated topics have transitioned away from things such as dialogue and the decontemporization of conversion. This text has inevitably served as a reason for the debate on these topics being less prevalent. Stott's eloquent pen and robust rhetoric result in a classic text that all interested in missiology must read.