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Book Review: The Living Church – Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor

Roger Trautmann

Multnomah University, rtrautmann@multnomah.edu

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Book Reviews

The Living Church – Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor

Reviewed by Roger Trautmann

Stott, John, The Living Church – Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor. Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2007. 180 pgs.

Experiential wisdom, biblically founded and practically implemented, characterize this book. Stott draws into conversation the modern day church tensions between the modern and post-modern epistemologies and evangelical traditionalists and the emergent movement. Stott clearly states, “the purpose of this book is to bring together a number of characteristics of what I will call an authentic or living church, whether it calls itself “emerging” or not. I hope to show that these characteristics, being clearly biblical, must in some way be preserved (15).” He credits in his preface remarks from Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bulger’s book, “Emerging Churches (London:SPCK, 2006)” and affirms through an endnote the writing of Mark Dever, “Nine Marks of a Healthy Church”, (Carol Stream, Ill: Crossway, 2004).

John R. W. Stott, Anglican clergyman, served as curate (1945-1950), rector (1950-1975), and now rector emeritus of All Souls Church, Langham Place, London. He has been a part of the church since early childhood with the exception of the years he studied at Cambridge. Stott was the principle framer of the Lausanne Covenant in 1974, and wrote an exposition of the document. Stott is an accomplished and prolific writer, publishing nearly 200 books and publications.¹ In 2005 Stott was honored by Time magazine as one of the “100 most influential people in the world.” He founded Langham Partnership International in 1969, a mission organization, with a vision to “see majority world churches being equipped for mission and growing to maturity through the ministry of Christian leaders and pastors who sincerely believe, diligently study, faithfully expound and relevantly apply the word of God.”²

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While a young pastor in Illinois, I ventured to IVCF Urbana in 1970, where I was first introduced to Stott. There a host of college and university students (12,000 plus) listened to him expound on John 13-17, the "Upper Room Discourse." There was an attraction to the words of this scholarly yet humble man as he drew messages from the biblical text.

Statements posted on the Urbana website from his teaching are: "If the love in our hearts is Christ's love, we shall not shrink from sacrificial service, from a service which is costly in energy, dignity, money or time." "The work of the Spirit can never be considered apart from Jesus Christ. He is the Spirit of Christ. His paramount concern is to reveal Christ to us and to form Christ in us." "To be Christian is ...to be personally, vitally, organically related to Jesus himself." "We have a solemn responsibility, now that Christ himself has left the world, to remain in it as his representatives and to make known to others the revelation which he has made known to us."

The breakout discussion sessions were packed with students. That event has drawn me to read the wisdom of Stott put to print. Reading "The Living Church- Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor," I gain the sense of sitting in an easy chair of a library with a wise, experienced mentor calling a younger protégé to consider core values that become the basis of ministry. He is polishing before me his gems of wisdom.

Nearly forty years later Stott's wisdom is still influencing a greater Christian community as noted by the cover jacket endorsements of David Jackman, president of Proclamation Trust; Eddie Gibbs, Senior professor, Fuller Seminary; Dr. Timothy Keller, Senior pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York; Mark Driscoll, Pastor, Mars Hill Church and Acts 29 Church Planting Network, and his successor at All Souls Church, Richard Bewes.

Stott begins the book with the Grand Essentials – God's Vision for His Church. His readers, he assumes, have a commitment as Christians to the church, its mission, reform and renewal (20-21). A "spirit-filled" church is distinguished by the living realities of a learning, caring, worshiping, and evangelizing congregation (Acts 2: 42-47).

Stott seeks to unpack qualities of a "Living Church" through the succeeding topics of: Worship – Glorifying in God's Holy Name; Evangelism: Mission through the Local Church; Ministry: The Twelve and the Seven; Fellowship: The Implications of *Koinonia*; Preaching: Five paradoxes; Giving: Ten Principles; and Impact: Salt and Light. The conclusion of the book is a call to "Looking for Timothys in the Twenty-First Century."

Through the chapters he consistently extracts from biblical text principles governing these various topics, linking them to aspects of the traditional church – particularly expressions in Anglican tradition. Stott adds three addendums which exhibit personal willingness to vulnerability. Historical perspective – “why I am still a member of the Church of England” exposes his thinking in the conflict with D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones of Westminster Chapel in 1966. In the face of liberalism among Anglicans regarding the inspiration of Scripture and the like, Lloyd-Jones called for a withdrawal. Stott, chairing the Assembly of Evangelicals organized as the Evangelical Alliance, opposed such a trajectory. Alluding to Martin Luther King’s famous speech in Washington, DC, Stott expresses his heart, in poetic form, of his dream for the Church. The last addendum was penned on his eightieth birthday, April 27, 2001, “Reflections of an Octogenarian.” He calls for balance in the rush of opportunities, to keep perspective midst overwhelming responsibility.

Did Stott reach his objective? Yes and no. He seeks to take a centrist position and articulate the tensions by such terms as “holy-worldliness.” He affirms the cardinal values of the evangelical church grounded in the authority of scripture and calls for the church to relate in “gostructures” to engage in mission and evangelism through word and deed (55). Some would land on the side that he gives up too much and others would declare he is not engaging enough, in mission in particular, to the “post-modern” epistemology. Some readers argue for “hard-sets” and others “soft-sets” of a “missional” church to a “pluralistic culture.”

The chapter on preaching focuses on the tensions of communication between revelation of scripture and its authority and the audience receptivity. He declares that all preaching is “expository preaching- not in the narrow sense of that term (a running commentary on long passages), but in the broad sense (it opens up the biblical text)”(98). In his articulation of the “five paradoxes” he brings together the ideals of evangelical tradition and the tension of contemporary times (see “Between Two Worlds”, Stott, 1982).

Taking the centrist position calls for reflection and refocus. For those who are Stott champions this book is “polished gems set in solid gold” and for the more absolutist thinkers, Stott is too compromising. Stott carefully surfaces the tension.

Another challenge is the perspective of the author Stott himself, in the British context and the Anglican tradition. Some of the aspects of the book will resonate with all readers in ministry, and others are particular to Stott and the All Souls Church. The

reader working on renewal or church planting in another tradition or context will need to sift through Stott's reasoning to look for the gems of wisdom that can be implemented in all contexts.

While referring to Gibbs' and Bolger's research (*Emerging Churches*, 2005), in the preface, Stott does not quote from the book nor reference it in any other part of the book. Some would also consider his references in the body of the book dated.

Uses of the book: For ministry leaders the book brings to the surface many of the challenges of ministry between biblical ideals, historical tradition, and contextual implementation. Nothing in the book is earthshakingly new. Stott set forth an excellent articulation of core convictions of a life-long pastor. It exhibits his "theology of ministry."

This is a great book for a reading group to use in discussion of issues related to church ministry. A mentor and protégé would profit by exploring this book through reading and conversation. Stott's warm conversational style calls readers to ponder, as he has done, the ideals of biblical revelation and the contextualized application in church ministry.

Reviewer

Trautmann, Roger. Address: 8435 NE Glisan St., Portland, Oregon 97220. Title: Director of Career Center, Mentoring-Internship Director. (B.A., *Colorado Christian University*; M.Div., *Western Baptist Seminary*; D.Min., *Biola University - Talbot School of Theology*). Email: rtrautmann@multnomah.edu

NOTES

1. See www.librarything.com/author/stottjohnrw or www.christianbooks.com
2. See Website www.langhampartnership.org