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Reflections on 2 Timothy 4:6-8 in Grateful Memory of John R. W. Stott

(27 April 1921 – 27 July 2011)¹

by Steven M. Bryan

“For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6-8). This memorable and moving passage in which Paul self-consciously speaks about his impending death serves as a fitting text to focus a few thoughts in grateful memory of John R. W. Stott who finished his race on 27 July 2011 at the age of 90.

A Kept Faith

In remembering a life given in service to the Lord and his Church, I wish to make three broad connections between 2 Timothy and the man fondly known around the world as “Uncle John”, followed by three more specific comments about vv. 6-8. The three broad connections focus on Stott as one who vigilantly guarded the gospel.

1. Biblical Authority and Evangelical Essentials

First, one did not have to be around John Stott for long or to have read many of his books to notice that he was extremely careful with Scripture. He worked hard at the text. He cared about what it said, and he cared about communicating it well. That attitude is characteristically on display in his commentary on 2 Timothy and you can feel Stott’s feeling rise as he unpacks the opening charge of 2 Timothy 4: *“preach the word.”* For Stott, Scripture – what he called “the sceptre by which King Jesus reigns”² – and its exposition were absolutely central to ministry: “We have no liberty to invent our message, but only to communicate ‘the word’ which God has spoken and has now committed to the church as a sacred trust.”³

John Stott did his theological training at Cambridge back in the 1940s at a time when liberal theology held the day in both Cambridge and in the Church of England. But a theology that rejected biblical authority, watered down the

¹ The article is based on a meditation given at a memorial service for John Stott in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on 28 August 2011.

² Cited in Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001) 412.

³ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Gospel: The Message of 2 Timothy*, BST (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973) 106.

atonement, and downplayed the necessity of personal conversion held no fascination for him. And on these he never wavered. These were for Stott the essentials of evangelical faith – the revelation of God, the saving work of Christ and the transforming work of the Spirit.⁴ But his convictions about the centrality of the cross and the necessity of personal transformation were rooted in his belief in the authority of Scripture.

Some fifty years after his Cambridge resistance to rampant skepticism about biblical authority, Stott came to Ethiopia and made Scripture and its ultimate authority the focus of his Frumentius Lectures, sponsored by the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology. While in Ethiopia, he intentionally met with Ethiopian Orthodox leaders and followed this up with practical assistance to Orthodox seminary libraries. But in his lectures he was uncompromising: with a number of Orthodox in attendance, he said that if the Orthodox would give up the assertion that the Church and its tradition was equal in authority to the authority of Scripture, then he felt certain that other differences could be resolved.⁵ The unity of Christ's church around the world was an enduring concern for Stott, but he was unwilling for that unity to be purchased at the cost of the authority of Scripture.

I lived for three years in England and would sometimes hear British evangelicals express reservations about the debate within American evangelicalism about "inerrancy". Stott seems not to have shared these reservations. In a 1988 book, in which he and the liberal theologian David Edwards conducted a written debate, Stott wrote, "I also wonder why you seem so anxious to persuade me that inerrancy is untenable? It is entirely your concern for intellectual integrity. But I am committed to this also." Stott went on to suggest that the real problem behind doubts about Scripture is the fear that "submission to biblical authority" might prove incompatible with the freedom to *think* what one liked.⁶ He felt just as strongly that preaching, if not anchored in exposition, only led to a freedom to say what one liked.

2. "Double Listening"

Second, Stott's commentary on 2 Timothy was the first in the Bible Speaks Today series that Stott launched in an effort to support a ministry of the Word which Stott called "double listening" – a vision of preaching which

⁴ This explicitly Trinitarian understanding of Evangelicalism is laid out in Stott's *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999).

⁵ Personal recollection of the author.

⁶ Cited in Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: The Making of a Leader* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999) 181-182. In *Calling Christian Leaders: Biblical Models of Church, Gospel and Ministry*, (Leicester: IVP, 2002) 76, Stott urges readers not to be embarrassed by the doctrine of Scripture's verbal inspiration, which "means that what the Holy Spirit spoke through the biblical authors... is true and without error."

listened to both text and context.⁷ In this too, Stott followed a tradition that went back to Paul. In 2 Timothy 4:3-5, Paul grounds his exhortation to Timothy to preach the Word in the contextual realities that run counter to the gospel: “*For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths*”. Stott himself was deeply tuned in to the cultural realities and contextual trends that lead people away from the gospel and which desperately needed to be addressed by gospel-centered ministry. Stott was never cranky, but for him the task of relating Scripture to culture most often places the preacher in a position of dissent. Speaking on 2 Timothy 3-4, Stott said, “[T]he Word of God and the mood of the day were, and still are, radically incompatible with one another. And to insist that the Word of God speaks to our time does not mean that the Word of God agrees with our time, because it does not. On the contrary, the Word speaks most authentically to the world when it subjects the world to rigorous critique...”⁸

3. The Gospel and God’s “Self-Substitution”

Third, Stott’s commentary on 2 Timothy was aptly called *Guard the Gospel* and that too reflects Stott’s characteristic concern to keep the gospel central. As Stott rightly notes, Paul writes to Timothy out of a strong sense that the gospel for which he had labored since his conversion on the way to Damascus was now seriously at risk at precisely the moment when its foremost steward is at the point of death. And so Paul writes to Timothy out of a concern for the preservation of the gospel. As for Paul, so also for Stott there could be no doubt about what lay at the center of the gospel – the cross of Christ. And for Stott there could be no doubt that the central meaning of the cross was the idea of substitutionary atonement. Stott acknowledged that Scripture uses various metaphors or images to describe salvation, but for Stott the “self-substitution” of God is not simply one image among many but rather the essence of salvation: “The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.”⁹

⁷ His Galatians commentary was written earlier but was not initially a part of the BST series.

⁸ Cited in Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry*, 337.

⁹ Cited from John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* in Christopher J.H. Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 125.

A Faith Passed On

Much of the latter half of Stott's life was given over to a variety of initiatives to ensure that the charge to faithfully preach and pass on the gospel was picked up by the next generation of leaders. Again from his commentary on 2 Timothy: "The church of our day urgently needs to heed the message of the second letter of Paul to Timothy. For all around us we see Christians and churches relaxing their grasp of the gospel, fumbling it, in danger of letting it drop from their hands altogether. A new generation of young Timothys is needed, who will guard the sacred deposit of the gospel, who are determined to proclaim it and are prepared to suffer for it, and who will pass it on pure and uncorrupted to the generation which in due course will rise up to follow them."¹⁰

This is Paul's primary concern in 2 Tim 4:6-8 – a concern that Timothy take up the charge to preach the gospel which Paul must now lay down. Paul's way of doing that is to point to the impact of the gospel in his own life and ministry. He notes three things in particular.

1. A Gospel Life: Living a Life of Dying (v. 6)

In v. 6, Paul describes his life as a drink offering which is already being poured out. To understand the metaphor, it is perhaps important to remember that a drink offering was a sacrifice which was never offered alone but always and only alongside the primary sacrifice. There can be little doubt that for Paul the primary sacrifice was Christ's own sacrifice. But the impact of the gospel in Paul's life is seen in the fact that he thinks of his own life as a co-sacrifice - a sacrifice offered alongside of Christ's. Life is thus conceived as dying: dying to sin, dying to self, dying even to any and every claim that his life was his own.

The last book written by Stott before he died is called *The Radical Disciple*.¹¹ He wrote the book explicitly intending that it be his last – a kind of farewell. The last chapter in the book is on death. The remarkable thing about this is that Stott deals with death as an aspect of discipleship. This is vintage Stott, faced with the prospect of his own death he explores death as a way of thinking about and indeed as part of our discipleship to a crucified Messiah. This is what he calls "one of the profoundest paradoxes in the Christian faith: life through death."¹² We receive Christ's resurrection life through his substitutionary death, and thus dying becomes the pattern for living. Stott simply expresses what Paul's metaphor of the drink offering implies – that for someone who lives within "the paradox of life through death", physical death is simply the culmination of a life of dying. A life lived as dying makes physical

¹⁰ Stott, *Guard the Gospel*, 22.

¹¹ John Stott, *The Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of our Calling* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010)

¹² *Radical Disciple*, 112-3.

death the completion of discipleship. Stott did not die a martyr, but his death bears witness to the gospel of life through death because he made death to self the pattern of his life. In a culture desperate to hold on to life, Stott, like Paul, poured his out.

2. A Gospel Integrity: Conforming Ministry to Message (v. 7)

Shortly after Stott was in Ethiopia in 2003, he suffered a fairly serious stroke. He eventually recovered and in March sent me a fax in which he said he was glad to report that he was “back at work and fighting fit.”¹³ But in line with Paul’s words in v. 7, I think Stott’s life was always fit for the fight. John Stott’s biographer notes that at school, Stott was decidedly mediocre in sports, but as a depiction of a faithful life, the words of v. 7 are an entirely fitting description of how he lived his life. Probably all three parts of v. 7 relate to the athletic metaphor. If so, Paul’s meaning is that he had been in the right contest and had competed in the right way. Both of those things are crucial. Many Christians are fighting but are fighting the wrong fight; we’re running but running the wrong race – extraordinary exertion in the wrong cause. For Paul, the fight is the gospel; he contends for the faith. The contest is not a competition with other leaders – who can build the biggest church or make the biggest name for himself or get the most education. Paul’s struggle, rather, is for the display of God’s glory in the crucified messiah.

Not only did Paul run the right race, he ran it in the right way. There is a dual sense to his assertion that he has “kept the faith”. He has not only preserved an uncorrupted gospel, he has also lived a life faithful to the gospel and to the way of life inherent to the gospel. For Paul, it was absolutely vital that the manner of one’s life conform to the substance of his message.¹⁴ He refused to preach the self-sacrifice of Jesus and then live a life of personal ambition. He did not preach the message of one who emptied himself only to turn around and fill his own pockets. He would not preach the good news of a God who humbled himself and then obsess about titles and positions, about status and power. He conformed his ministry (and his life) to his message. He fought the right fight in the right way. That same integrity of life is one of the richest legacies that John Stott leaves to the Church.

3. A Gospel Reward: Gaining What the Gospel Gives (v. 8)

In v. 8, Paul anticipates the reward that awaits such a life. The reward is the crown of righteousness. Paul’s meaning, of course, is not that he will get something that he has earned, but rather that he eagerly awaits what the gospel alone can achieve. Paul’s gospel is of a God who makes us righteous as part of his ultimate aim of setting the world to right. The gospel creates a

¹³ Personal fax communication to the author, 25 March 2004.

¹⁴ Cf. Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006) 676.

love for God and a love for what he does through the gospel. And what he does is set things to right. The fulfillment of this hope - the crown of righteousness - is not so much for those who fear hell or a reward uniquely reserved for those entrusted with unusual gifts. Rather, it is for all whose fondest dream is for the appearance of a judge who will set the world right. They will get what the gospel gives; they will gain what the cross of Christ achieves. That was John Stott's dream. It was a gospel dream, and, like an African stirred from sleep by a powerful dream, he knew it had to be shared.

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