

Book Reviews

John Stott

The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor

Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007. 192 pages. Paperback. \$9.25.

Reviewed by Emmanuel Kwasi Amofo

John R. W. Stott, an internationally respected evangelical English Christian leader, passed away in July 2011 at the ripe old age of 90 years. Written in Stott's eighty-sixth year, this book displays the same characteristic and forceful clarity of presentation and sound biblical reasoning that have made his earlier books such a significant contribution to modern Christian evangelical thought.

In *The Living Church*, Stott presents the essential characteristics of a living church from his perspective as a lifelong pastor. In the preface, Stott states: "*The purpose of this book is to bring together a number of characteristics of what I call an authentic or living church ... I hope to show that these characteristics, being clearly biblical, must in some way be preserved*" (17).

I consider this book to be of particular importance to African church leaders today whose Church is often described as "a mile long and an inch deep" for its lack of meaningful discipleship and sound evangelical theology.

In the first chapter Stott draws his principles from Acts 2:42-47 and declares that because the Holy Spirit has already come at Pentecost and because His work imparted these qualities to the early Jerusalem church, today what we the church need to do is to "*humble ourselves before God, and seek His fullness, the direction and the power of the Holy Spirit... so that our churches will at least approximate to the essentials of a living church in apostolic doctrine, loving fellowship, joyful worship and outgoing, ongoing evangelism*" (34). In chapter two, Stott identifies biblical worship, congregational worship, spiritual worship and moral worship as being the four characteristics that mark the worship of a living church.

Stott argues in his third chapter that to make local church evangelism effective it must be incarnational; i.e., modeled after the mission of Christ who laid aside his heavenly prerogative to take on our human identity, to enter into our pain, and to die our death. In chapter four Stott draws on Acts 6 and concludes that, because the twelve apostles were called to pastoral ministry and the seven deacons were called to social ministry, "*God calls different people to different ministries*" (79). Stott then derives from Paul's valedictory

speech in Acts 20 three essential marks of a successful minister - thorough teaching, thorough outreach and thorough methodology – and advises that ministers who demonstrate these qualities will value the people of God and protect them from false teachers. In his fifth chapter, Stott laments the fact that the church today “*tends to be aggregations rather than congregations*” (92). Stott appeals for a return to the concept of dividing congregations into smaller church and fellowship groups similar to the house churches of the early New Testament church. It is in these small groups, Stott declares, that Christians today can best express their common inheritance, their common service and their mutual responsibility to encourage and comfort each other.

Stott addresses preaching in chapter six. He observes that in a world “*drugged by television, hostile to authority and suspicious of words*” in which “*preaching is regarded as an outmoded form of communication*” preaching in the living church today should, among other things, be biblical and contemporary, authoritative and tentative, prophetic and pastoral (116). In chapter seven, Stott presents ten principles for giving in the church today that are thoroughly wise and biblical. In the eighth chapter Stott reminds us that Jesus told Christians to be the salt and light of society. If darkness and rottenness abound in our world today it is largely the fault of the church and we must accept that blame (143). Stott suggests that the church today can effectively fulfill its salt and light mandate in the world through prayer, evangelism, godly living, and Christ-centered socio-political action.

In the book's final chapter Stott calls upon church leaders today to be ethical, doctrinal and experiential. He calls for modern Timothys to come forth and embody these principles in their leadership of God's church to make it a truly living church.

The book ends with three historical appendices “*related in different ways to the living church*” (163). In the first of these, originally written in 1966, Stott explains why he is still a member of the Church of England. He states that he chose to stay in the church because he believes “*in the rightness of belonging to it and of maintaining a faithful evangelical witness within it and to it*” (177). In the second appendix, as evidence of his long-held passion to see a living church, Stott presents a sermon entitled *I Have a Dream of a Living Church* that he preached on November 24th, 1974. It commemorates the 150th anniversary of All Souls Church, the church he pastored for thirty years. The third and final appendix is entitled *Reflections of an Octogenarian*, written on Stott's eightieth birthday, October 27th, 2001, in which he offers to today's church leaders three convictions about priorities, obedience and humility.

The scriptures reveal to us and the church affirms, by both experience and conviction, that the resurrected and living Lord Jesus, exalted and seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven, is spiritually and vitally connected to His Body, the Church, here on earth (Eph. 1:20-22). The Church, in other

words, has its head in heaven while its feet and hands perform God's will physically here on earth.

What God purposed for Christ, He has also purposed for His Body, the Church (John 17:18 and John 20:21). To avoid the incongruity of having our Living Head uncomfortably connected to a lifeless, ineffective and irrelevant Body here on the earth today, the Church will do well to carefully and prayerfully put into practice the eight biblical and historically-proven marks of a living church that Stott, motivated by his faith in "*the power of God's word and Spirit to reform and renew the church*" (177), has so masterfully and passionately presented in this book. I whole-heartedly and unreservedly recommend it to Christian people everywhere burdened with a desire to see a living church.

Barend Johannes van der Walt

***When African and Western Cultures Meet:
From Confrontation to Appreciation***

Potchefstroom, South Africa:

The Institute for Contemporary Christianity in Africa, 2006

R150, approx. \$20.00 US ISBN 1-86822-510-0 pb 317 pages

To buy, contact the author at hannah@interkom.co.za

Reviewed by Jack Mitchell, Scott Christian University

In a world of super-sensitive cultural awareness and interchange, what happens when two of the world's largest cultural blocks meet? What are the points of interface that have provided the opportunity for great promise and yet great disappointment? What are the tensions and lessons one can gather from the meeting of Africa and the West?

Using Africa's many challenges and the Western world's attempts to assist in alleviating them as a backdrop, Prof. B.J. van der Walt has sought to illuminate the phenomena of cultural diversity and intercourse in the meeting of the African and the Western worlds. Until his retirement in 2002, the author was a professor of philosophy and then the director for Reformation Studies at the Potchefstroom University. At that time he became a Research Fellow at North-West University in S. Africa. His career in research, teaching, writing and speaking, enable him to contribute to this discussion from both an academic and insider's perspective.

In seven well-organized chapters, Prof van der Walt defines the most egregious challenges facing Africa, and uses each as a case study to help illuminate what happened when African culture met the West. Addressing issues such as development schemes, globalization, and leadership, the author's purpose is to both analyze the often troubling intersection of cultures in general as well as glean insights from the particulars of the meeting of Africa and the West that can be applied to the broader spectrum.

His thinking is based on an avowedly Christian and Reformed perspective. Furthermore, he states very early in the book that cultural diversity is a gift from God that is meant to enrich our experience as human beings (p. 15). He then sets about to analyze the specifics of Africa and the West in order to address why such a good thing from God has gone bad.

The author specifically pinpoints some of Africa's most challenging issues: poverty, the failure of development schemes, the troubling influence of globalization, leadership failures, the plight of women, and the agriculture crises. He enhances his study with two chapters - "A shame versus guilt-oriented conscience" (ch. 6); "The Western way of thinking compared with the

Eastern and African mode of thought" (ch. 7) - that further diagnose other causes of African and Western clashes. At the same time, he weaves the issues of cultural imperialism and relativism into his assessment, both of which have further complicated attempts at cultural conjunctions.

Finally, the author rounds out his study by focusing on two specific areas that will serve some readers well: "A Liberating Message for Women in Africa" (ch. 8); and "Direction in the Crisis in Agriculture" (ch. 9). The chapter on women has many helpful thoughts, and essentially follows a Western egalitarian argument for the recognition and enhancement of women's participation in all spheres, both private and public. Concerning agriculture, he begins by defining the crisis of agricultural methods amidst the presence of ubiquitous malnutrition in Africa. His discussion includes definitions of reality in competing worldviews, the role of political, social, and economic factors, and the questionable role of technology in resolving the crisis.

There are numbers of strengths that make this treatise a valuable resource for academicians, as well as thoughtful pastoral leaders who are seeking to lead at a time of radical transition amidst the forces of globalization. The author has provided numerous bibliographical resources for those who desire to explore more specific areas of interest. From a Christian perspective, his clear view of the Christian Church's role in cultural interchange is encouraging. His approach is critically constructive (i.e., objective and balanced) on a broad diversity of issues (e.g., use of power, pp. 144-146; worldviews, pp. 208-213; and learning styles, pp. 216-219), which he enriches with helpful recommendations to assist the reader in personal reflection and practical implementation. And last, but not least, the book is clearly written despite some translation oddities.

Weaknesses are few but good to keep in mind as one reads. The author's assessment, while African, is clearly from a South African perspective. Furthermore, many of his resources come from fellow Dutchmen, both South Africans and Europeans. He reached strong conclusive statements that at times seem based on insufficient evidence (pp. 245-246; 263). Finally, the book would be an even more valuable resource with the addition of indices.

As stated earlier, the strength of this book's contribution is its focus on key issues in the African-Western intersection. The author has sought to address issues that thoughtful African leaders in and outside the Church will find insightful and pragmatically helpful. It is potentially very helpful for African Christian pastors, particularly those seeking to lead congregations that straddle the traditional African worldview and methods and the contemporary technology-led culture of youth and urban areas. Understanding the issues is a giant step in knowing how to lead those who are caught in the competing forces of modern Africa. Prof. van der Walt's study is a good place to start for those who need basics, as well as for those who desire greater insights.

Dean Flemming

***Contextualisation in the New Testament:
Patterns for Theology and Mission***

Leicester: Apollos, 2005.
£14.99 ISBN: 9781844741007

Reviewed by Georgette Short, Scott Christian University

Dean Flemming's award-winning book *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* is an outstanding contribution to our understanding of how we should be living out the gospel in ways appropriate to different contexts. As a New Testament scholar and an experienced missionary, Flemming is well qualified to write on this subject. Although he has written widely about contextualisation, this book adds something new. It examines how the New Testament writers go about contextualising the gospel for their day. Drawing on the latest scholarship and illustrating his points with his own experiences, he makes a detailed study of key New Testament books to see how they can help us to contextualise the gospel in the 21st century.

Beginning with a study of Acts and Paul's letters and then going on to the Gospels and the book of Revelation, Flemming builds a detailed picture of the complex world in which the early church lived and sought to spread the good news. His careful exegesis of these texts is not simply for better understanding but also to examine the methods Paul and his fellow writers used in communicating the gospel so that we may learn from them as we seek to do the same thing in our time. His final chapter, which deals with how to contextualise the gospel today, draws together what he discussed earlier in the book to show how we today might use similar approaches to those used by the New Testament authors.

Flemming's excellent understanding of the context in which the New Testament was written and his detailed study of its texts give us insight into how its writers contextualised the gospel in their day. One of the strengths of Flemming's approach is to show that this was not a simple task for the early church any more than it is for us. Because the culture of the Roman Empire was as diverse as any culture today, there is no one method that fits all situations. Flemming makes this particularly clear when he examines how Paul presents the gospel to the different people he encounters in the book of Acts and identifies the variety of methods he uses to make the gospel accessible to them. He emphasises Paul's ability to adapt the way in which he presents the gospel according to the audience he is addressing. He also suggests that we need to keep a balance between sensitivity to the needs of the particular

group we are trying to reach and the gospel of God's saving action in Jesus Christ. His study of the Gospels demonstrates that because they are a different genre from the letters, they need to be treated differently. Dismissing the notion that each Gospel was written for a particular community, he nevertheless accepts that knowing their target audience in a broader sense helps us to understand them better and this enables him to show how each Gospel writer presents Jesus in a way appropriate to his audience. Flemming's chapter on the book of Revelation discusses how it would have spoken to its original audience as well as highlighting its relevance for us today. He demonstrates that while it is a highly contextualised response to the pagan situation his early church readers were living in, John's use of imagery and drama can help us as we seek to contextualise our message to a generation that is shaped largely through media and sensory experience.

The last chapter of the book, which discusses contextualisation today, is particularly significant for the contemporary church. It gives no trite answers or formulae but it does bring together much of what the author has looked at in previous chapters and gives some helpful guidance on how we might apply these insights to our evangelistic encounters today. He pinpoints the similarities between the 1st century milieu and ours and suggests ways in which we might employ similar approaches. He also argues that there is a need for constant re-evaluation and reformulation of our theology in the light of both Scripture and our changing circumstances. But, significantly, he also reminds us that the work is God's, not ours, so that our foolishness and mistakes do not cause the harm they might otherwise do. Therefore, as in the early church, the Holy Spirit continues to guide the church today.

The church in the 21st century, wherever it is seeking to share the good news of Jesus Christ, must think deeply about how to contextualise its message so that it is understandable to those outside the church. Flemming's book shows that this is not a new problem and that the New Testament is rich in insights that can help us carry out this task. He demonstrates the many ways in which the complex cultural landscape of the 1st century echoes our own. He offers us models of contextualisation that we can employ to incarnate the gospel message in ways that people from different cultures can understand. As the world's cultures continue to become more complex, the message of this book is one the Church needs to hear. This book is not only helpful to those engaged in cross-cultural ministry but also for the church in the West as it seeks to present the gospel to a post-modern society.