

Memorial Service for John Stott

St Andrews Cathedral Sydney

August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Romans 12

John Stott is known as a great Christian leader, a hugely influential man with a global reputation. But if you want to go to the heart of the matter, you could better characterise his life simply by saying that he was a man who worshiped the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Listen to the Apostle describe such worship. Whether you are to be a great leader or merely a very ordinary person, this is the path you must travel:

‘I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.’ (Romans 12:1). Here he shows us the basis, impetus, motive, substance and nature of true worship. In the rest of the chapter he shows us what the transforming consequences of true worship.

First, its basis.

There is no grander description of the mercies of God than that given to Paul by the Holy Spirit in the Epistle to the Romans. There is the mercy of God in creation and the mercy of God in revelation and the mercy of God in salvation and the mercy of God in consummation. His compassion reaches out to Israel who had the promises and failed; it reaches out even to Gentiles who did not have the promises, who had not even that claim on God, and whose failure is written as the history of the world, and it claims them and brings them home.

Now, he says, if you have grasped the compassion of God, or rather if you have been grasped by the compassion of God, therefore, this is the basis, this is what must follow.

Second, its impetus.

He does not lay down the law; he does not command; he exhorts. And yet what he says is not optional. He does not need to lay down the law, because if by the Spirit you have been grasped by the love of God poured into your hearts, then you will of course give yourself in the worship of God. What alternative do you have?

Third, its motive.

The motive of our worship of God is the compassion of God, the mercies of God. It is that mercy by which he has just told us both Jews and Gentiles are to be saved. Notice that he does not say that our worship is based on the wrath of God, though the wrath is real; he does not say that it is based on the Law of God, though the Law is holy and good and true; it is not based on the nature of humans, though we are bound to worship God as mere creatures and sinful ones at that; rather it is based on the love of God.

And when the Apostle talks of the unbounded victorious, mighty love of God he uses as its greatest measure the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross, a sacrificial death on behalf of God's weak, ungodly enemies. It is no accident that one of Stott's best books is his study of the death of Jesus; that is the epitome of religion which is evangelical, reformation and biblical. It was the gospel for which he stood; it was the gospel which animated his whole life.

Fourth, its substance.

The true and only worship of God is the presentation of our bodies to him as a sacrifice. Our bodies, because our bodies here stand for the whole of us; in a

world which thought that the essence of being human was the spirit, Paul tells us that our spiritual worship is a matter of matter, of the body, or as we would say, of the whole person. We do not yield to God our spirits only or our elevated religious feelings. All must be his, our life in this world as well as our life in the next. And our sacrifice is a living one, not dead; it is holy, belonging entirely to God and not to us; it is acceptable, because it is offered not in our own strength, but in and through Christ.

Fifth, its nature.

Our true worship is spiritual and reasonable. It may be bodily, but it is not merely bodily. It does not consist of formal observances, physical postures, endless repetition and ritual. It is reasonable because it is appropriate to the God who is worshiped and it is therefore spiritual, the worship of God in Spirit and in truth. It is found in our glad obedience to God as we live for him in the world which has created.

You have given yourself to the Lord; you are utterly his person. How does that show itself?

‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

‘(do) not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think...

‘Let love be genuine...do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit serving the Lord

‘Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality

‘Bless those who persecute you...overcome evil with good.

‘Be subject to the governing authorities.’

Here is the picture of a man or woman who worships. Here is a picture of the heart of John Stott and for this in particular we honour him and we give God

thanks. He was a man who, as one who knew himself to be a sinner and deserving only condemnation, who knew himself to be weak and unable to save himself, who knew himself to be justified only by the blood of Jesus Christ, worshiped God. His faith in God, his assurance of the love of God poured into his heart by the Holy Spirit, was the secret of his influence and the power of his ministry.

From the middle of the twentieth century, three outstanding overseas leaders helped shape the life of the Diocese of Sydney. The great evangelist, Billy Graham; the great theologian, Jim Packer; the great preacher, John Stott. To this very day, the converts of the Graham Crusades can be found in all our churches; the books of Jim Packer can be found in all our libraries; the preaching of John Stott inspires all our pulpits.

Of course their impact here was all the richer because they found an existing evangelical ethos which welcomed their ministries and understood what they were doing. They shared with us the basic tenets of biblical, evangelical and Reformation Christianity – the supreme authority, sufficiency, clarity and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture; the sinfulness of sin and God's righteous condemnation of sinners; the peerless centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man; the sin-bearing substitutionary and propitiatory work of the Lord Jesus in his death on the cross; the need for the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and conversion; justification by faith alone; Christ as the one and only way of salvation; the personal return of Christ at the end of the age to be the judge of the living and the dead. This is what set their hearts on fire and when it ceases to be our passion, we will have ceased to be evangelical, no matter what we may call ourselves.

Not only did we welcome these ministries; we were in a position to study them, emulate them, refine them in the light of our own culture. The evangelical resources, not least in Moore College meant that the inspiration of

the evangelist, the theologian and the preacher could be assimilated and made locally fruitful in the years that followed.

I have called John Stott a preacher and since I suppose that is what he was pre-eminently. But he was also of course a very fine evangelist and theologian. Indeed one of his earliest visits here involved extensive evangelism in Sydney University, an occasion which was glowingly described to me as recently as last Sunday, by one who heard him in 1958. Of course his book, *Basic Christianity* arose from evangelistic talks he gave in 1952 at Cambridge University. Had he done nothing else than publish that one book he would have been notable. It taught us the fundamentals of the gospel and God used it to convert our next door neighbour, Phoebe, in 1977. And his theological grasp of the issues posed by the charismatic movement meant that he did not embrace it and his example helped us also to stand firm.

When we think of the influence of his preaching, however, we have in mind especially his expository style, his method of taking a verse or passage of scripture and following its thought through until its meaning and implications were clear. This was a contrast to the usual method of taking a verse or two out of context and delivering what amounted to devotional or doctrinal or ethical thoughts in line with the Christian inheritance which for some of us at least had been our usual fare up until then. The Stott method looked at whole paragraphs, chapters and books and showed us how to read. It showed us the authority of the Bible; it made the Bible clear; it helped us see the sufficiency of scripture. All these things would be under severe threat in the decades which followed and Stott gave the best answer of all: he showed us that the Bible makes sense and how it is the source of faith and the means by which God rules our lives.

The impact of this would not have been so great on us had it not been the case that at the same time we had the leadership of Marcus Loane and the theological wisdom of Broughton Knox, Donald Robinson, Bill Dumbrell, Bruce

Smith and Graham Goldsworthy. Their scholarship and practice enabled us to embrace the gifts of John Stott, Billy Graham and Jim Packer and turn them to our sustained good. You cannot preach like any of these men if you will not follow their practice of deep and lengthy study.

I have said that John Stott was a preacher and evangelist and a theologian. But he was of course much more than that. He was an author and thinker; he was a world-leader, whose opinion and advice was in constant demand; he had a vision for the world because Jesus had a vision for the world; he inspired ministries and networks such as the Langham Trust and EFAC; he enhanced and transformed the lives of multiple individuals by spending time with them; he modelled parish ministry – his cathedral was All Souls Langham Place and countless were the people who found their way there to be inspired, enriched, taught and equipped for ministry elsewhere. He showed us what church could be like if it was founded on and inspired by the gospel. He was an Anglican – of that there was no doubt; he made his choice. But he understood that it is the true genius of Anglicanism to be evangelical first and denominational second.

A preaching ministry which began in the local church, was thoroughly biblical, exercised by a man with vision for the world, a man who could network, start or encourage really fine ministries run by other – and I have not mentioned a quarter of what he did, what he was involved in, what he inspired – Lausanne, student work, theological education – the list goes on. In England in particular, he was the leader of the evangelicals, bringing together and holding together the different strands and individuals, speaking for them and to them as no one else could. We give God thanks for this extraordinary man and do our best to learn from him and even imitate him.

But who can take his place?

For that is an issue isn't it? A great leader inspires confidence and creativity in others. We love such leaders. Because we live in a disordered and chaotic world we expect that God will raise up leaders for us like the judges of old, to help us fight our battles, guide us in the darkness and assure us that all is well. As long as we can refer to a Graham, a Packer, a Stott, or a Lucas or a Carson, we know that the cavalry near and we are not alone. But it is often the case that when the one we so admire passes on and we look round expectantly for the next leader, there is no one at hand. At least no one we *recognise* as God's gift for this hour. Often this is because we measure the new by the old: we want someone exactly like the old - a younger Billy Graham perhaps; or we want someone who is distinctly not like the old. We demand that God will send the leader we want.

I suppose we have two temptations. We can attempt to *find* the leader, or we can attempt to *make* the leader. That is, we are tempted simply to search a charismatic individual, a gifted soul who catches the eye, presents well, who says things which are faintly cheeky, one who promises much. Or, we can come to believe that successful ministry is simply a matter of the technique of leadership and we can study to become leaders – we can even receive degrees in leadership. Excellent though this may be, it does not create a leader.

But a study of scripture and of Christian history tells a different story. Alongside the blessing of God on the steady and faithful ministry of his word, is the ministry of the extraordinary leader. Such leaders cannot be predicted, cannot be created, and cannot be demanded; they can only be recognised when God sends them. They do not follow our ideal pattern of leadership. In God's providence, times change, situations alter and new gifts are called for. When and if God sees our need, he will send the one who is to be the extraordinary leader, as unexpectedly as a Nehemiah perhaps, or as Mordecai said to Esther: 'Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' We can be sure of this, though: if a leader is indeed a gift from God, he will be faithful in doctrine and life.

But there is a deeper reason why human leadership of the type we want may not be instantly at hand. John Stott was not our real leader. God himself is our

Lord, our chief, our king. He sometimes sends us outstanding human leaders; sometimes he does not, so that we may all the more trust him and not in any human effort. And constantly we need to be reminded that even such great ones are but mere sinful men, themselves in need of salvation and all they would want of us is that we would glorify the Lord Jesus, their Saviour and ours, and make him our great Leader.

For if we wish to follow the true lead of a man like John Stott, we must see him first as a man who worshipped. He was no idol and he did not idolise himself; his immense gifts were turned away from self-worship. Rather, he his life was dominated by what the Apostle Paul called, 'our spiritual worship'. I cannot tell whether some here may be great leaders of God's people, veritable Princes and Judges in the land. But I can tell you that indispensable to that role is the truth that John Stott exemplified. The danger is that your great gifts may be the gifts of the empty, fatuous and dangerous. The extraordinary gifts of John Stott were only of any use because he understood what it was to be an *ordinary* Christian, a Christian whose whole life was worship. His path was no different from yours and mine: it is the path of repentance, of commitment, of surrender, or worship, of obedience, of humility.

John Stott was pre-eminently gifted for leadership; that is true. But his leadership would have been futile or worse if we did not also see in him the consistent out working of spiritual worship. We see it in that he did not conform to the dictates of this age, in its vanity and ambition and permissiveness and greed, but rather he allowed his mind to be renewed and his life transformed by the constant study of God's will as disclosed in scripture. He did not escape the world; on the contrary he urged us all to attend to the world in its pain and suffering and called upon us to obey the Biblical injunctions to walk with justice and compassion. This is the will of God and our business is to obey the Lord's will. The truly wonderful thing is that although Stott, Packer and Graham were called to minister in a new day, a post-Christian day, a day in which so many others who started well have fallen into compromise and false teaching, they never did, they never conformed to

this age. Their bold courage, their faithful witness has humanly speaking saved the faith of thousands, perhaps of millions of their fellow Christians. They did not abandon the world; they knew their world; they faced their world; but they did not succumb; they did not conform to the world. What a gift from God. They stood with Christ and him crucified, no matter what the world thought, and for this we thank God and seek to emulate their faith.

He was never slothful; his ability to bless us through preaching was the fruit of long and rigorous biblical study and preparation. Do not imagine that true leadership is consistent with a sort of elegant laziness. On the contrary he served the Lord with a fervent spirit. In consequence he never let us down as so many leaders do by personal failures. Integrity, honesty, holiness – these are not the exclusive prerogative of the leader, but they are the indispensable requirements of leadership. They come at a cost, and John Stott paid that price because he understood the love of God in Christ. His was a cross-shaped life. In the end, nothing will take the place of the school of the cross, of the living sacrifice in response to the one great sacrifice of the Saviour.

There is one other consequence of true worship which I think characterised John Stott and should characterise all of us: ‘not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned’. A few years ago, Christine and I had John to stay with us overnight. We had met before of course, but we still could not escape that feeling of apprehension and nervousness which we humans feel in the presence of the great, the good and the powerful. Of course his manners were perfect in any case, but it is not a matter of manners if I say to you that he made us feel at home in our own home. There was a sheer modesty, graciousness and unselfconscious humility to John which was utterly impressive. It was worship at work; it was love at work; it was of course the Spirit of Jesus at work.

We can pray that God will again send us leaders like John Stott. The Lord may or may not do so; my guess is that any human leader is going to look different. Except for this: if such a one is given to us as God's gift and not God's judgement, he will be a person who has been captured by the love of God in Christ Jesus and therefore has the cross at the very centre of his life and so worships the one true God with the spiritual worship which manifests itself in obedience to the will and purposes of God.

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