



Stott, John.

The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth
New Jersey

I have to be honest in admitting that when I had originally received this book I wasn't very excited about it. For one thing, it just showed up in the mail unannounced. I had written IVP and told them I was interested in books on topics XYZ but I hadn't listed any specific books that I wanted to review. Well, this is what they sent. I had honestly never heard of John Stott and because this wasn't an academic book I didn't really think that there would be too much to learn from it. How wrong I was. It was a genuine privilege to have *The Living Church* as my introduction to Stott's writing. This may have been my first book of his but I can guarantee that it won't be my last.

Stott is very engaging in the way he writes. There's something warm about it and you can sense a genuine pastoral concern for his audience as well as a real love and devotion to Christ. This is refreshing given the vast amount of dry writing that I am subjected to in my preferred reading material. I'd like to be able to say that this is a book for pastors, but it's just as much for the flock as it is for their shepherd. Stott takes his decades of experience in pastoral ministry and missions and whittles it down into basically an annotated outline of what the Church as a whole should look like. To tell the truth I was tempted to actually outline the entire book and present it in the review.

Stott begins by assuming three common commitments shared by his audience (19-21):

1. We are all committed to the Church.
2. We are all committed to the mission of the Church.
3. We are all committed to the reform and renewal of the Church.

After establishing these Stott asks the questions: "*what is God's vision for his church? What are the distinguishing marks of a living church?*" (21) Taking Luke-Acts as his starting off point Stott asks "*So what did the early church look like? What evidence did it give of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit?*" (22) For Stott the distinguishing marks of the church are that it is a learning church devoted to the apostles' teaching. He

views the true apostolic succession as the continuity of the apostles' teachings handed down via the New Testament throughout the ages (24-25). At one point he makes an argument that I personally disagree with in claiming that if we still had apostles today then their teaching would have to be included in the NT canon. But this assumes that everything the apostles taught was included in the first place. I don't really see that as a plausible idea. But this small disagreement aside I can't agree with him that the church should also be a caring church willing to sacrifice for the good of the community. Stott also sees the importance of worship and evangelization deeming them essential (28-33).

All of these ideas receive further development in subsequent chapters but an underlying theme is balance. Stott emphasizes the importance of balance in all of these areas. To be heavy in one area is to neglect another and this will not do. I found his chapter on ministry to be most helpful. The ideas were not novel but they were well thought and presented very matter-of-factly (which marks his presentation throughout). Basically he just emphasizes the fact that there is no one ministry in the church and that God calls everybody to one ministry or another. After quoting Acts 6:3-4 and then vs. 5-6 he makes a very simple observation saying:

A vital principle is embedded in this incident, which the church urgently needs to re-learn in every generation, namely that "everybody cannot do everything." (73)

As simple and obvious as this sounds it is actually lost on so many ministers. I can attest to being one in my early walk with the Lord. I thought that I had every spiritual gift and was called into every ministry in the church; it was truly zeal without wisdom. But Stott's words here agree with those of Paul in 1Corinthians 12 and should be taken to heart by all believers.

Stott's overall vision for the church is not some fantastically unachievable organization. His expectations are real and Biblically grounded. He expects the church to teach, preach (97-110), fellowship (86-96), give (111-27), take care of its members and make a difference in the world around it (128-42). His expectations for believers are no less than those of Jesus. He expects us to be both salt and light; in the world but not of it. He doesn't advance segregation like in the Amish communities nor does he advocate assimilation like some of the emerging churches. Again, Stott's focus is on the Bible and balance.

He closes the book with three appendices that are meant to be somewhat autobiographical. He gives an account of why he is still an Anglican, delivers a speech on his vision for the Church, and he reflects on his years of ministry after turning 80 years old.

I wholeheartedly recommend this book to any and all. I believe that pastors will learn how to better build a living church and congregants will learn how to better spot a living church from this book. The brevity and simplicity of the book really prohibited me from going into too much detail in this review but I can assure you that Stott's vision is

profound and attainable. If we as the body of Christ can come together in fellowship, learn to worship God in spirit and in truth, and start caring enough about the world around us to make a difference in it and in the lives of those living in it, then Stott's dream church will have come to fruition. I'll be honest in saying that even in the midst of so much turmoil in the world, I'm optimistic that we will see the living Church. But according to Stott I have no choice but to be an optimist as he says:

We need in particular to repent of our pessimism. Christians have no business to be pessimists. Faith and pessimism are incompatible. To be sure, we are not starry-eyed idealists; we are down-to-earth realists. We know well that sin is ingrained in human nature and in human society. We are not expecting to build a utopia. But we also know that the gospel has transforming power, and that Christ has commissioned us to be effective salt and light in the world. So let us offer ourselves to God as agents of change. Let's not excuse ourselves by developing a minority complex!
(141)

I recommend this book because of its readability, simplicity, and profundity. It is truly what I would consider a survival guide of sorts, teaching what is vital to the life of the church. Pick up a copy for your pastor or friend/family member that's a pastor.