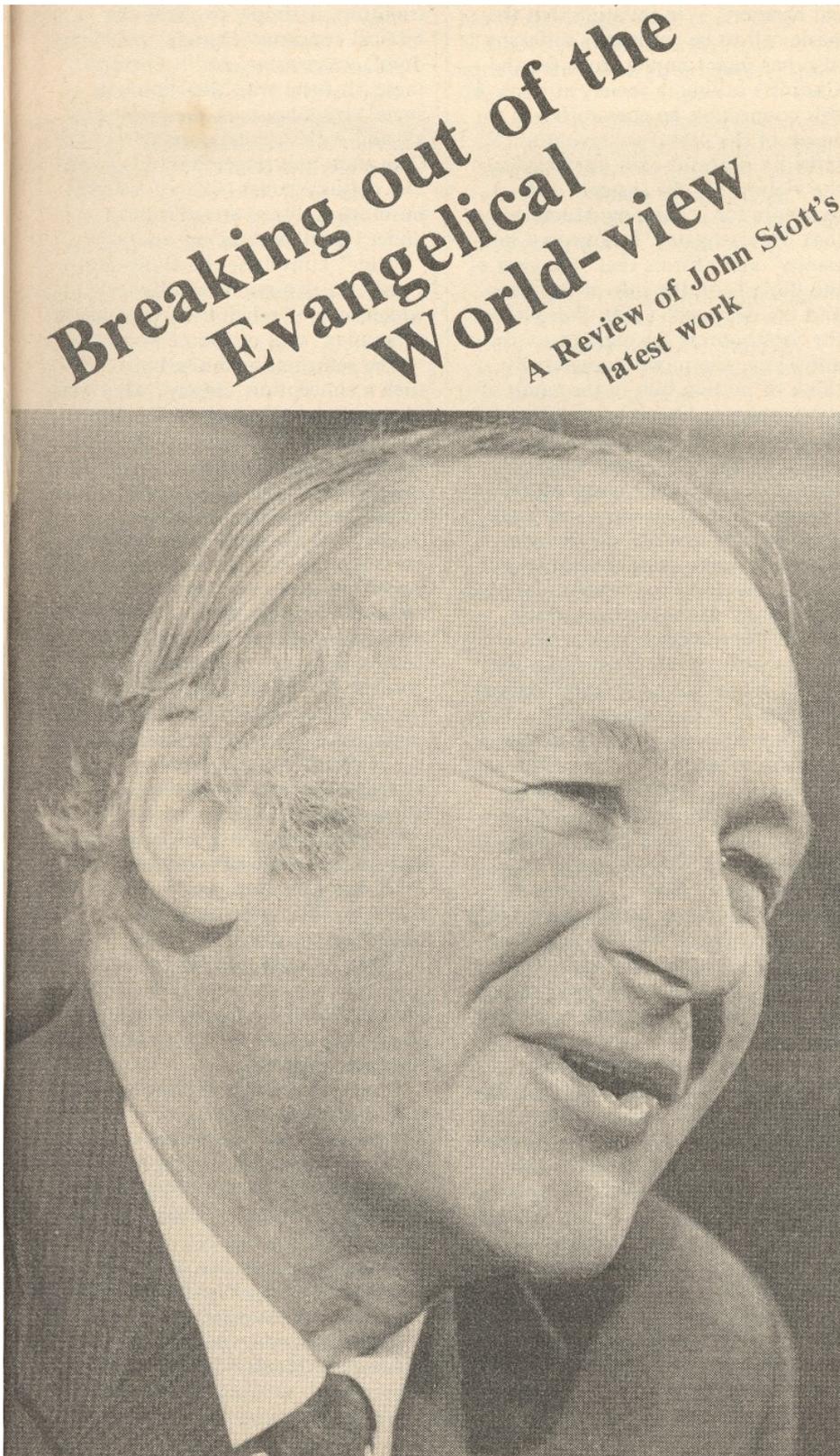


**Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount** by John R. W. Stott. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979. 222pp. \$3.95.



John Stott's latest book is distinguished from most other evangelical books on the Sermon on the Mount because of the author's evident desire to relate the Sermon to the broader issues of social justice today. It is probably one of the most solid and respectable products of the much-vaunted "awakening of social consciousness" among evangelicals, and, as such, deserves both the active sympathy and lively interest of the reformational community.

The "General Preface" speaks of a threefold ideal: "to expound the biblical text with accuracy, to relate it to contemporary life, and to be readable." These are admirable goals, which I believe have been largely achieved in the work under review. My own report card on it would read as follows: Exposition - "very good;" Application - "good, but ...;" Style - "excellent." I propose to comment briefly on the first point, expand a bit on the second (especially as it relates to social concerns), and let quotations suffice for the third.

Though popularly written, Stott's exposition is based on solid independent study of the Greek text, and on a wide range of the exegetical tradition of the church. Stott's favourites seem to be the Reformers (with Calvin quoted a bit more often than Luther), while the twentieth-century Bonhoeffer comes not far behind.

Aided no doubt by this broad historical

orientation, Stott proves to be a reliable guide on the broader questions of interpretation which have played such an important role in the attempts to understand the Sermon on the Mount. Against the redaction critics, he defends the unity and authenticity of the Sermon (21 ff.). Against the new morality he repeatedly affirms the positive role of law in the christian life (29, 72, 80), and consequently stresses that Jesus' so-called "antitheses" (But I say unto

you...”) are not directed against the law of Moses, but against the rabbinic misinterpretations of it (76). Against Albert Schweizer and his followers he argues that the standards of the Sermon are not an “interim ethic” or an impossible ideal, but the norms which hold and can be obeyed in the Kingdom of God now (26-29). Furthermore, he frankly asserts that the Sermon in many places is misinterpreted by a strict literalism (89, 102, 107, 130, 134). On these and many other disputed points, it seems to me that Stott makes wise and well-informed exegetical decisions.

This is not to say that there aren’t disputable points of interpretation. I personally disagree with Stott’s interpretation of the much-debated clause “except on the ground of unchastity” in the passage on divorce. Stott lends weight (97-98) to the venerable tradition of casuistry within christian orthodoxy, which treats this clause as a kind of loophole in God’s law for marriage, not as one qualification of the assertion that the remarriage of divorcees spells adultery.

As for Stott’s application of Jesus’ teachings to contemporary life, this too is in many ways admirable and well-done. Most of the Sermon deals with the inner disposition of man, and the consequences this has for his personal relationship to God and his neighbor. On Jesus’ radical requirements concerning such matters as anger, marital fidelity, love of enemies, prayer and fasting, Stott says many excellent things, drawing on the widespread orthodox consensus which has grown up around them.

One general feature of his application deserves to be mentioned separately, both because it constitutes perhaps the basic theme of the book and because it represents a biblical emphasis only too often neglected in contemporary christian thought. It is Stott’s insistence that we heed Christ’s call to be different from the world. Near the beginning of the book he writes: “To me the key text of the Sermon on the Mount is 6:8 - ‘Do not be like them’” (18). Near the end of the book he recapitulates: “Repeatedly during our study we have heard his call to his people to be different from everybody else” (210). On this point Stott is completely right, in my judgment. What we in the reformational tradition have called the “antithesis” does indeed lie at the very heart of biblical religion. A decision for Jesus Christ means a taking of sides in the lifeencompassing spiritual opposition between his regime and that of his Adversary, an opposition which implies an across-the-board break with the enslaving power of sin. In underscoring this basic spiritual reality Stott is at his biblical best.

Stott is also good - and in this he is far ahead of many of his evangelical brothers - in insisting that the basic call to be spiritually different also has direct implications for the Church’s calling in society at large. In this connection he goes so far as to speak of the need for “revolution” (albeit a peaceful one), for helping the victims of “the system” and therefore for “changing structures” (64). He castigates “bourgeois Christianity” and affirms that “the God of the Bible is on the side of the poor and the deprived” (154). Were it not for Stott’s stress throughout on the antithesis, one might occasionally think of putting him in the camp of contemporary liberation theology. Far from leading in a Marxist direction, however, Stott’s double emphasis, from the standpoint of evangelical Protestantism, on both antithetically distinct and broadly societal renewal, would seem to put him much closer to the reformational tradition in his basic sympathies.

This impression is reinforced by other themes in his exposition. He speaks repeatedly of “common grace” (59, 120-1, 185), is constantly quoting Calvin, makes much of the positive function of law (74-81), refers to state and family as created social structures (66), and closely links “Kingdom of God” and “Christian counterculture” (193). Clearly, there is a marked convergence in themes and emphases between Stott, as a leading representative of socially conscious evangelicalism, and the heirs of Abraham Kuyper. This is something we can only welcome and be grateful for.

Nevertheless, my applause for Stott’s call for christian social involvement is qualified by a serious reservation. This has to do with what I take to be a basic ambiguity in Stott’s world-

view, which in turn has serious consequences for the tenability of his call for christian social action. At the risk of seeming to downplay the many appreciative comments which I have made so far, I propose to examine at greater length Stott's world-view and what appear to me to be its contradictions.

A brief excursus is in order to explain what I mean by "world-view" in this connection. In a christian context, this, refers specifically to the way such basic categories as "church", "world" and "kingdom" are related to society and culture.

The perennial temptation, best exemplified by the Roman Catholic tradition, is simply to make the biblical concepts "church" and "kingdom" coextensive, and to identify these, in turn, with the church as social structure, with the result that all non-ecclesiastical social structures (like state, marriage, family, school) and cultural zones (like art, science, business, politics) are subsumed under the all-embracing category "world." Thus arise the many versions of a two-realm world-view, which puts a "religious" over against: 't a "secular" area or sphere in creation.

The reformational alternative to such a conception, closely linked with: the work done in biblical theology by such Reformed scholars as Herman Ridderbos and Geerhardus Vos, rejects every two-realm theory. Instead, it sees "kingdom" and "world" (in the sense "this age") as two regimes, each contending for dominion over *every* sphere in creation. That dominion is implemented by the two basic spiritual communities into which mankind is divided: the Church and the "world" (in the sense of people). The Church as community, though headquartered' in the church as social structure, is in principle called to implement Christ's regime in every other structure or zone, just as the "world" lays claim also to the whole of creation. In brief, the Kingdom/world distinction, together with the peoples belonging to each, is not correlate with any societal or cultural distinction, but cuts across them all. Human: life, wherever it is lived, is at bottom; religion - either service to Christ or bondage to Satan.

If we put the alternatives in this way, I think it is fair to say that Stott has a two-realm world-view struggling to become more integral. This is perhaps best illustrated by quoting a very reformational-sounding passage from Stott:

Indeed, the divorce of the sacred from the secular in church histor has been disastrous. If we are Christians, everything we do, however 'secular' it may seem (like shopping, cooking, totting up figures in the office etc.) is 'religious' in the sense that it is done in God's presence and according to God's will. (153)

How like the slogan "life is religion" this is! And yet it is significantly different. These apparently secular activities qualify as "religious" only "if we are Christians" and if they are done "according to God's will," and the quoted passage continues:

One of the emphases Jesus makes in this chapter [i.e. Matthew 6] is precisely on this point, that God is equally concerned with *both areas of our life -private and public, religious and secular*. [The emphases here, as in subsequent quotations, are my own, not Stott's]

Despite his good intentions, Stott divides human life into two areas, sacred and profane, and moreover makes the fateful correlation with private and public.

This underlying dualism comes to clear expression in the distinction Stott makes between "kingdom of God" and "social righteousness." In typical two-realm fashion, he begins by restricting the Kingdom to the Church: God's kingdom is Jesus Christ ruling over his people in total blessing and total demand" (170). But since he also wants to recognize the wider scope of God's claims, he makes a distinction (which I find exegetically arbitrary) between

“kingdom” and “righteousness.” In his comments on Matthew 6:33 (“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness”), he argues that “righteousness” is a broader term than “kingdom”:

God’s kingdom exists only where Jesus Christ is consciously acknowledged.... But God’s “righteousness” is (arguably at least) a wider concept than God’s “kingdom.” (171)

By the righteousness which falls “outside the circle of the kingdom” (172), Stott means specifically “social righteousness.”

And social righteousness is concerned with seeking man’s liberation from oppression, together with the promotion of civil rights, justice in the law courts, integrity in business dealings and honor in home and family affairs. (45)

What is significant about this is that the struggle for political, economic and family righteousness (or justice) apparently *falls outside the kingdom of Christ*.

A further significant consequence of Stott’s dualism is that his central concept “counter-culture” is also restricted to the area of Church and kingdom. The christian counter culture, of which the Sermon on the Mount gives “the most complete delineation anywhere in the New Testament” is defined simply as “the life of the kingdom of God” (19).

Moreover, this means that it is equated with God’s community, the Church:

... the Christian counter-culture is not just an individual value-system and life-style, but a community affair. It involves relationships. And *the Christian community* is in essence a family, God’s family (192).

Consequently, we get the following equation: Kingdom = Church = christian counter-culture, while social righteousness is something which falls outside this sphere.

But this raises an acute problem. If the kingdom of God, and therefore the christian counter-culture, do not encompass the social righteousness required in society at large (including the state, the business enterprise and the family), how do they relate to it? Stott gives his answer in his commentary on Jesus’ words “You are the salt of the earth” (Matth. 5:13):

This means that, when each community is itself and is true to itself, the world decays like rotten fish or meat, *while the church can hinder its decay*.

Of course God has set other restraining influences in the community. He has himself established certain institutions in his *common grace*, which curb man’s selfish tendencies and prevent society from slipping into anarchy. Chief among these are the state (with its authority to frame and enforce laws) and the home (including marriage and family life). These exert a wholesome influence in the community. Nevertheless, God intends *the most powerful* of all restraints within sinful society to be *his own redeemed, regenerate and righteous people* (59).

The Church, God’s redeemed people (and therefore his kingdom and “counter-culture”) relates to society at large as a *restraining influence*, as salt which prevents decay. Stott explicitly takes the salt image to refer to christian “social action,” as distinct from evangelism (65). It is noteworthy that the Church is here clearly distinguished from the state, marriage and the family; although the latter are also restraining influences, they are not only weaker influences, but fall short of being kingdom salt altogether. They belong to the area of “common grace,” whereas the church/kingdom/counter-culture represents the area of “saving grace” (120). Consequently the “salting” action of social involvement is here restricted to the church - the church, moreover, as *societal* institution, clearly marked off from non-ecclesiastical social structures.

Christian social action, therefore, would seem to be a largely negative affair. Stott explicitly contrasts “salt” (social action) and “light” (evangelism) as the negative and positive sides of christian influence on the world (64). Although he does mention in passing (58) that salt is not only a preservative, which arrests decay, but also a condiment, which actually improves the meat to which it is added, he does not pursue this part of the salt image. In fact he quotes with approval the words of R.C.H. Lenski: “The thought of making the world palatable to God is quite impossible” (59). This seems to discourage any thought of an inner reformation of society outside the bounds of the church. At best “the righteousness of God’s kingdom will, as it were, *spill over* into the non-Christian world” (172).

This last image is very telling. Social righteousness is “spilled-over” kingdom righteousness. Saving grace cannot bridge the chasm separating it from the area of common grace, “the secular life of every day” (133). It would seem that the powerful influence of an ingrained and traditional two-realm conception prevents any genuinely positive and intrinsic connection from being made between the kingdom and grace of Christ and the wide range of creational life in society and culture outside the institutional church.

Nevertheless, this is not the whole picture. I spoke earlier of an *ambiguity* in Stott’s world-view, and it would be unfair to him to present his perspective as a classical two-realm conception without qualification. Although all the crucial elements are there, are in fact emphasized and repeated, he also seems to contradict himself at crucial points. It is precisely these contradictions which strike me as signs of Stott’s struggle to free himself from an inherited [13] framework, and which lay the foundations both for his radical call to social justice and for a christian “counter-culture” in a much broader sense than he presently allows for.

We have spoken of Stott’s emphasis on the religious antithesis implicit in the call to be different, and we have seen that the two-realm view locates this antithesis on the dividing line between Church (=kingdom= counter-culture) and world (=the secular sphere / society / culture). Yet it is remarkable how strongly Stott also stresses the antithesis within the church. After pointing out that “righteousness” is called for in both church and world, he writes: “in *both spheres* of righteousness Jesus issues his insistent call to his followers to be different.” And again: “Christians are to be different from both Pharisees and pagans, the religious and irreligious, the church and the world.” (126; cf. 153) We see here that the antithesis line cuts across the churchworld dichotomy to conform more closely to the biblical idea of a clash of two regimes which both lay claim to all of life. This paradoxal theme of “the worldliness of the church itself” (126), and the consequent need to be different within the church is brought forward repeatedly by Stott, most notably in his forthright discussion of false prophets (197-200).

The two-realm scheme seems also to be broken through, or at least relativized, in the passage we have quoted about the state, marriage and family as restraining influences in secular society *next to* the church. To be sure, they do not qualify as “salt,” properly speaking, but their difference from the Church is spoken of as a matter of degree: the Church is only “*the most powerful* of all restraints within sinful society” (59). The conclusion is not very far away that God can also work positive renewal in and through (christian) families, for example.

Particularly telling are some unguarded remarks on Christ’s “rule” and “kingdom.” Normally, Stott is careful to use “rule,” as a synonym of “kingdom,” in a sense restricted to the Church (161, 170, 219). “The kingdom of God is his royal rule” (147). But in his discussion of Luther’s conception of the two kingdoms (in many ways the prototype of evangelical two-realm conceptions), Stott suddenly criticizes it sharply: “For Jesus Christ has universal authority, and *no sphere may be excluded from his rule.*” (113) In a momentary and happy lapse, Christ’s kingdom is presented as world-wide, unrestricted to any “sphere,” and shattering all talk of two “kingdoms” or “realms.” The same happy inconsistency is found in Stott’s brief summary of the Sermon on the Mount, in which the disciple’s activity “in the arena of public life” is presented as part of his being “a citizen of God’s kingdom” (24).

These could perhaps be read as small and insignificant inconsistencies in an otherwise consistent and coherent world-view. But they assume greater importance in the light of Stott's really radical calls for social reform. At one point he breaks altogether with his ill-chosen equation of preservative salt and christian social action:

And alongside this condemnation of what is false and evil, *we should take our stand boldly for what is true, good and decent* whether in our neighborhood, in our college, profession or business, or in the wider sphere of national life, including the mass media.

Christian salt takes effect by deeds as well as words. We have already seen that God has *created* both the state and the family as social structures to restrain evil and *encourage goodness*. And Christians have a responsibility to see that these structures are not only preserved, but are also *operated with justice*. Too often evangelical Christians have interpreted their social responsibility in terms only of helping the casualties of a sick society, and have done nothing to *change the structures which cause the casualties* (66).

It is at this point, where Stott stresses the christian responsibility for the structural *reformation* of society, especially in its non-ecclesiastical structures, and does this in the context of a reference both to their created nature and the justice they require, that Stott is closest to a reformational conception of social action. What is needed to buttress such a positive view of "social righteousness," however, is a world view which can integrate Kingdom of God, created nature, and structure specific "justice" both in society and culture. As long as the first term is dualistically isolated from the second and third, it strikes me that there can be no integral foundation for the social righteousness for which Stott so eloquently pleads.

A concluding remark about the place of *culture* in Stott's conception. Although the word is frequently used, especially in the expression "counter-culture," the idea of culture is really not discussed at all. As we have seen, "Christian counterculture" really refers, for Stott, to the personal relationships within the christian community (cf. 174). Unlike Chester A. Pennington's book *Christian Counter Culture: A Place to Stand for a Faithful Minority* (Abingdon Press, 1973) Stott does not deal with such pressing cultural issues as the place of technology, science and economic production in our civilization. Even if we take "culture" in its narrow sense, so that it includes primarily such aesthetic matters as art, literature and music, we will hardly find any reference to it in Stott's book. Significantly, the one place where it is mentioned is in his discussion of the commandment: "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off ...." This may mean, Stott explains, that we must "deliberately decline to read certain literature, see certain films, visit certain exhibitions .... We may have to become culturally 'maimed' in order to preserve our purity of mind" (p. 91). Although this may be true, it is striking that "culture" even in the more restricted sense of the word is mentioned only in such a negative context: that the kingship of Christ might also lay claim to this broad sphere of human life seems to be quite foreign to Stott's thinking. Strictly speaking, it seems that the christian counter-culture excludes not only social righteousness but culture itself. To sum up, we can say that Stott's exposition of the Sermon on the Mount is excellent in most matters relating to the spiritual and moral life of the believer, is prevented by a two-realm theory from giving a convincing foundation for his excellent remarks on structural christian social action, and really says very little about what a christian counterculture might look like.

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