

A Clear Steer on Stott

Roger Steer “Inside Story. The life of John Stott” (IVP: 2009) A Review: by Simon Vibert

There have been lots of worthy tributes of John Stott, a man of God whose influence was felt throughout the latter half of the 20th century and resonating around the world. I am sure there will be much synthesis and analysis of his 50 books, strategic thinking, insightful logic and godly influence.

Roger Steer’s book belongs in this genre. Although it was published in 2009, in Stott’s 88th year, the biography covers his last public speaking event in Keswick in July 2007 and concludes with comments and appreciation from leaders around the world. Among many other positive comments about the book, “Inside Story” belongs among the first of such tributes and reflections on this great man of God.

On Steer

“Inside Story” provides lots of insights gleaned from Stott’s personal diary and notes, interviews with friends and careful conversation. In fewer than 300 pages Steer has managed a distillation of 90 years and 50 books. He combines biography and bibliography!

He has similar gifts of succinctness and clarity which are so admired in John Stott. For example, in summarising Stott on Evangelical Christianity, he says:

Evangelicals held the three “R’s” – revelation, redemption and regeneration, associating revelation with the Father, redemption with the Son, and regeneration with the Holy Spirit. Yet the more the three persons of the Trinity were glorified, the more completely human pride was excluded. To magnify the cross of Christ was to confess our utter lostness without it. To magnify the regenerating, indwelling, and sanctifying role of the Holy Spirit was to confess our abiding self-centredness without it. (p.250).

Though in every respect a saint - a man who took holiness seriously - Uncle John would have hated hagiography. Steer has succeeded in being honest and at the same time deeply appreciative and respectful.

At times there are some clunky gear changes. The transitions from one chapter to another feel a bit arbitrary and the book tends to list rather than critique (e.g. the Peter Forster and Jim Packer comments on “double listening” on p.237 could do with some evaluation).

Nevertheless “Inside Story” is a very valuable addition to the many past (and no-doubt forthcoming) appraisals of John Stott’s ministry. Steer regularly succeeded in causing me to pause and pray; to give thanks and ask to be Christ-like in the way John Stott was. This was the fitting theme of his final Keswick appearance in June 2007: “God wants us to become like Christ. Christ-likeness is the will of God for the people of God.” (p.271).

On Stott

The John Stott we meet in “Inside Story” could be summarised as follows: He was a man of incredible self-discipline. He took seriously the challenge of Isaiah 1:18 “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord”, and was sometimes accused of “evangelical tidy mindedness”. But this gift of succinct clarity is unsurpassed in evangelical writing.

He also allowed himself to be challenged and to change, a point which Steer brings out very well. In early years, his self-discipline was perhaps in danger of leading him to an individualistic private pietism. He was challenged to learn to really listen and ultimately developed the notion of “double listening” as a model of faithful biblical preaching. His vision for setting up organisations and evangelical bodies (e.g. , EFAC, CEEC, Langham Partnership), and critical and costly intervention in the 60’s tension between Anglican Evangelicals and the Westminster Fellowship under Martyn Lloyd Jones, has implications even for today.

There is so much more to say, but not to be over-looked was Stott’s personal interest in helping the poor and downtrodden. This was eventually worked out in a thorough evangelical conviction about social concern and evangelism. I was interested to note that both Steer and Stott considered “The Cross of Christ” as his finest and most important book. Of course, the contribution this book makes to a clear understanding of penal substitution as central to the many faceted ways in which the cross may be viewed and the penetrating application of the Scripture’s teaching on what was achieved by God through the work of the cross must not be denied. However, I wonder whether enough has been made of the huge impact of “Issues Facing Christians Today” in encouraging a biblical vision for the poor and the alienated alongside the need for effective evangelism. I know that for me, reading “Issues” was a life transforming experience.

Personal

So many people will want to add their own testimony to the influence of John Stott on their life. For me, there at least four things with which I resonated strongly in Roger Steer’s book.

Firstly, I am inspired by Stott’s amazing self discipline over a lifetime matched by a willingness to change. He stayed faithful and grew in stature and wisdom. He exemplifies what Eugene Peterson calls “A long obedience in the same direction”, which is indeed a challenge to much modern, instant and “quick fix”, spirituality.

Secondly, as a preacher, Stott’s rigorous study of the text alongside the gift of succinct clarity is desperately needed in our pulpits and something which I want to be the hallmark of mine and a new generation of preachers.

Thirdly, despite the caricatures of stuffy upper class Brit (possibly justified in his early years), Roger Steer has done a good job bringing out his great interest and love for all kinds of individuals. Evangelical ministry is about application of the Word of God to *people*.

Finally, John Stott was a strategic thinker working with the structures of Anglicism but also with the cross-denominational networks. Here is a great lesson from Stott: work out the things you do well, hone those gifts and skills, and spend a lifetime doing them.

So, thank you Roger for a good Steer on Stott!