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John Stott on Christ and the Bible

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Christianity Today magazine offers an important interview with evangelical leader John R. W. Stott in its current issue. Now 85, Stott was for many years pastor of All Souls Church, Langham Place, in London. He is also one of evangelicalism's most prolific authors.

In the interview with Tim Stafford, Dr. Stott stated:

An evangelical is a plain, ordinary Christian. We stand in the mainstream of historic, orthodox, biblical Christianity. So we can recite the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed without crossing our fingers. We believe in God the Father and in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

Having said that, there are two particular things we like to emphasize: the concern for authority on the one hand and salvation on the other.

For evangelical people, our authority is the God who has spoken supremely in Jesus Christ. And that is equally true of redemption or salvation. God has acted in and through Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners.

I think it's necessary for evangelicals to add that what God has said in Christ and in the biblical witness to Christ, and what God has done in and through Christ, are both, to use the Greek word, hapax—meaning once and for all. There is a finality about God's word in Christ, and there is a finality about God's work in Christ. To imagine that we could add a word to his word, or add a work to his work, is extremely derogatory to the unique glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is so much to admire in this statement. The part about reciting the historic Christian creeds “without crossing our fingers” is really clear. Furthermore, the Christocentrism of his definition of evangelical identity is also very important.

Tim Stafford expressed surprise that Dr. Stott did not mention the Bible. Dr. Stott went on to say:

I did, actually, but you didn't notice it. I said Christ and the biblical witness to Christ. But the really distinctive emphasis is on Christ. I want to shift conviction from a book, if you like, to a person. As Jesus himself said, the Scriptures bear witness to me. Their main function is to witness to Christ.

Then:

We believe in the authority of the Bible because Christ has endorsed its authority. He stands between the two testaments. As we look back to the Old Testament, he has endorsed it. As we look forward to the New Testament, we accept it because of the apostolic witness to Christ. He deliberately chose and appointed and prepared the apostles, in order that they might have their unique apostolic witness to him. I like to see Christ in the middle, endorsing the old, preparing for the new. Although the question of the New Testament canon is complicated, in general we are able to say that canonicity is apostolicity.

There is much good here as well — but there is also a nagging question. What access to Jesus and the apostles do we have apart from Scripture? The “apostolic witness to Christ” is found in the New Testament — not outside of it. Where

else could it be found? Furthermore, Jesus does not merely prepare for “the new” — He *is* the new.

I think we are on very dangerous ground when we speak of the authority of Christ and the apostles outside of Scripture. The New Testament is our authority for knowing Christ and the apostles.

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