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Review: 'Godly Ambition: John Stott and the Evangelical Movement'

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Godly Ambition: John Stott and the Evangelical Movement. By Alister Chapman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xi + 222 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

In 2005 *Time* included John Stott in its list of the world's 100 most influential people, describing Stott as both a "touchstone of authentic biblical scholarship that has scarcely been paralleled since the days of the 16th century European Reformers" as well as "a significant factor in the explosive growth of Christianity in parts of the Third World." With this Alister Chapman begins *Godly Ambition*, a compact analysis of Stott's career that certainly does justice to this extraordinarily significant figure in late 20th and early 21st century global evangelicalism. Thanks in good part to Chapman's access to Stott's personal papers (Stott died in 2011), *Godly Ambition* is a nicely textured study that also has the virtue of being well-organized, as the book moves from Stott's conversion to conservative evangelicalism to his time as rector at London's All Souls Langham Place to his work promoting evangelicalism in the Church of England to, finally, his decades as a "Christian star" on the global stage.

Throughout the book Chapman tries hard to assess the ways in which Stott's personal ambition mixed with his desire to spread the Gospel. The author could have pushed this question a bit harder – the meshing of Stott's godly and personal ambitions sometimes seems just a bit too neat – but that Chapman raises this question at all is very much to his credit. Related, and in some ways more interesting, is the degree to which Stott's ambition was shaped by his class location. Born into privilege, clearly blessed with a strong sense of *noblesse oblige*, Stott very much understood that he had a duty to lead, a commitment which certainly contributed to his conviction (never really abandoned) that the best evangelism involved reaching the best people, i.e., "the educated and potentially influential."

Stott's class sensibilities provide a fascinating backdrop to his growing conviction in the 1960s and 1970s that evangelicals must not only work to save souls, they must also seek to reform society. As Chapman tells it, Stott's efforts were crucial to the emergence of Christian philanthropic organizations in late 20th-century England that "tackl[ed] problems such as racism, AIDS, urban poverty, and hardships for the disabled." But as Stott took his expanded definition of the Great Commission – which owed much to his interactions with African, Asian, and Latin American Christians – to the wider world he ran into opposition from American evangelicals, many of whom held "that preaching the gospel was all that really mattered." As Chapman describes in perhaps the most fascinating section of *Godly Ambition*, this conflict came to a head at the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization and, especially, at the post-conference meeting, where Stott ended up in a showdown with Billy Graham over the question of whether evangelism should include emphasis on caring for people's physical needs. While Stott achieved some small victories, in the end "large swathes of global evangelicalism were only vaguely interested in the sorts of questions that preoccupied Stott and saw them as a potential distraction from the work of missions and evangelism."

As Chapman makes wonderfully clear, the matter of expanding the Great Commission is but only one example of the ways in which Stott was willing to change his mind over time, in the process becoming less the rigidly conservative evangelical. But *Godly Ambition* is a slim volume, and the author's discussion of some of the other changes is a bit thin. It is not clear, for example, if Stott's later commitment to the importance of hermeneutics also led him to modify his commitment to biblical inerrancy. On a related issue, while there is reference to Stott getting into trouble with conservative evangelicals in the 1980s for publicly raising questions as to whether "hell would in fact involve the eternal, conscious torment of the lost," there is no explanation as to where Stott finally came down on the issue. And while there is a brief discussion of Stott's

changing understanding of the role of women in church, it remains unclear to this reader, at least, how Stott ended up holding to the “confused” (the author’s word) position that “there was no ‘a priori reason why women should not be ordained’” as bishops in the Church of England while simultaneously maintaining that “male headship was ‘the ideal arrangement.’”

On the matter of sexual orientation, however, Stott had no confusion: God’s Word proscribes homosexuality. According to Chapman, unwillingness to change on this issue was evidence that for Stott “faithfulness to the Bible . . . trumped cultural accommodation.” Such an assertion precludes the possibility that Christians supportive of gay rights understand themselves to be living out the Gospel as opposed to selling it out. It would be lovely if one day evangelical scholars could resist the temptation to use more theologically liberal Christians as foils to highlight the greater religious commitment of more theologically conservative Christians. As regards *Godly Ambition*, a book which is eminently fair in so many ways, it seems neither necessary nor helpful for the author to contrast John Stott with the “fuzzy ecclesiastical pole-climber[s]” presumably found elsewhere in the Anglican church, or to strenuously assert that “it would be wrong to see Stott as a pathetic, left-leaning clergyman.”

This said, there is no question that Alister Chapman has admirably met his goal of crafting a “critical yet sympathetic account” of an exceptionally important figure in late 20th-century global evangelicalism. Those readers seeking hagiography will not be happy. Those readers seeking unrelenting critique will not be happy. Most other readers will find they have good reason to be pleased with *Godly Ambition*.

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