

John Stott's The Cross of Christ [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006]

On the first page of his original preface, Stott stated his theme: “the cross is at the center of the evangelical faith,” because “through Christ crucified, God substituted himself for us and bore our sins, dying in our place the death we deserved to die, in order that we might be restored to his favor and adopted into his family.” Three pages later, he stated his purpose: to show “that the biblical doctrine of atonement is substitutionary from beginning to end.”

Part I is an introduction. In chapter one, Stott showed the centrality of Christ's death in the teachings of Christ, the apostles, and the early church. Scripture shows Christ understood and embraced his purpose on Earth to be in his atoning death, and the apostles accepted and promoted that teaching. The implication is the modern evangelical focus should be on the relevance of Christ's death, not on his teaching, example, or works of compassion. In chapter two, Stott analyzed why Christ died, looking at the breakdown of the Roman justice system and the betrayal of Judas Iscariot, then moving into Christ's sense of purpose in meeting the need created by our sin. In chapter three, Stott expanded on the theme of the benefits Christ's death brought to mankind.

Part II deals with satisfaction and substitution. In chapter four, Stott established man's need of salvation because sin is a rejection of dependence and an usurpation of God's sovereignty, an attitude which God righteously greets with judgment and wrath. In chapter five, Stott reviewed the historical theories of satisfaction, concluding that Christ's sacrifice was necessary to satisfy God himself, to be consistent with every aspect of his perfect character. Christ's sacrificial death was the only way God could avoid suppressing either his love or his holiness. In chapter six, Stott related what happened on the cross to Old Testament sacrifices, Passover, and sin bearing. He also discussed the reality of God in Christ with the important conclusion that God and Christ were acting in unity, not as separate parties. This chapter also provides an even stronger conclusion to the discussion of the previous chapter, to understand the cross as “God satisfying himself by substituting himself for us” [159] and as the only means to true atonement.

Part III lays out achievements of the cross. In chapter seven, Stott explained how Christ's substitutionary death brought salvation, including propitiation of God's wrath, redemption of sinners' moral bondage, justification as righteous standing before God, and reconciliation in relationship with God. In chapter eight, Stott showed how Christ's death reveals God's glory, justice, love, wisdom, and power, but theories of the atonement concentrating on revelation at the expense of substitution are inadequate. In chapter nine, Stott revealed how Christ's death conquered death and evil for all believers, manifested in deliverance from the power of sin, salvation from death, Spirit empowered proclamation of the gospel, and Christ's perfect obedience and resistance to Satan.

Part IV relates implications of the cross for believers. In chapter ten, Stott maintained that Christ's sacrifice was in part to establish the church whose members would be in right relationship to God, each other, and the world, resulting in thankful and celebratory worship and sacrificial living. In chapter eleven, Stott taught about the believer appropriating his new nature and the role of representing Christ. The believer affirms his value in God's sight, resists his sinful nature, and appropriates God's help for a lifestyle of holiness and sacrificial giving. In chapter twelve, Stott discussed loving enemies, conflict in the body of Christ, and authority of the state. In chapter thirteen, Stott related the believer's suffering to Christ's, discussing the causes of suffering, the blessings in enduring, and the hope believers have at all times. In his conclusion, Stott used Galatians to further emphasize the pervasiveness of the cross in our faith and life, and the basis of the cross for our justification, sanctification, witness, and celebration.

Stott did a brilliant job of using scripture to support his arguments, such as how the institution of the Lord's supper proves his thesis of the centrality of Christ's death in Christ's own theology, and how a correct biblical understanding of God and humanity leads to a correct theology of atonement. He multiple times asserted with scriptural support that Christ was not a victim but rather embraced his mission, and provided a convincing argument that sin is absolutely intolerable to God, both points in contrast to many modern theologies. Stott also provided exegetical and theological teaching on over thirty tangential issues, such as on the meaning of Christ's prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, the reasons for death and suffering, and how the Old Testament sacrifices were recognition of God's grace and man's dependence.

Stott's approach to other theologies is irenic. In dealing with various satisfaction theories, he culled the truth from each while explaining their weakness of representing God as subordinate to something external. He culled truth even from Abelard's Moral Influence Theory, while explaining its fault of asserting the revelation of the cross as redeeming instead of the truth that the redemption of the cross is revealing. Stott effectively refuted several other heresies, including the Roman Catholic view of the Eucharist, prosperity doctrine, universal claims to healing, liberal definitions of atonement that exclude bearing the penalty of sin, and the error of using a philosophy of moral justice to determine a theology of the cross instead the other way around.

Classic dispensationalists will find fault with Stott's claim that Christ is already reigning [232] and his use of the phrase "already not yet" [235], but Stott did a good job of explaining this dispensation of waiting for Christ's return. A more serious issue is Stott's view of the book of Revelation as a theological but not chronological history between the cross and Christ's return, the ongoing battle between Christ and Satan [242]. The casting of Satan from heaven [Rev. 12] refers to the cross, and the prostitute and "monsters" are all representative of Rome as persecutor, deceiver, and seducer [243]. While one might disagree with this exegesis, the Christology, soteriology, and angelology Stott pulled from it seems sound. Some will fault Stott for seeing Cain's sacrifice as insufficient for reasons other than the lack of animal sacrifice [136].

There were a few places where Stott's writing could have been clearer. There were vague and brief references to still being bound to obey the law, though it was not clear if Stott meant the Mosaic Law [237, 332]. In his discussion of the Eucharist, there was a vague reference to feasting on Christ, which was misleading [254]. And despite the immense amount of biblical theology he discussed, late in the book Stott said the Bible's "purpose is more practical than philosophical," and with regard to sin and suffering, "its concern is not to explain their origin but to help us to overcome them" [304]. Smaller errors included a typo suggesting Leviticus 10.17 says there was atonement before the "Loin" [144], one reference to "the last century" which refers to the nineteenth [177], and an omission of a "third" point between the "second" and "fourth" [230-231].

Overall, Stott's writing is academically rigorous and theologically correct, while also inspiring and accessible to the lay person. As the Monergismbooks.com reviewer wrote, "...this book brings Scripture into living dialogue with Christian theology and the twentieth century." This is one of the best books I have ever read. As Robert Lightner said in his review of a previous edition for *Bibliotheca Sacra* [April-June, 1988], "Seldom does one find a book these days with such depth, latitude, and practical application." I heartily recommend it to anyone interested in better understanding the historical and theological details of the cross, appreciating what God has done for them in grace, and being inspired in their faith.