

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

A Model Evangelical Leader: John R.W. Stott

One of my personal heroes went to be with the Lord in July—the British scholar and Christian leader, John R.W. Stott. He was 90 years old. I will miss his pithy, succinct writing, his gracious style and his deep-seated commitment to genuine, biblical Christianity. [One of his books that profoundly shaped me was his classic, *Your Mind Matters*.] I was astounded recently that someone from the politically liberal end of the spectrum took notice of Stott. In his weekly column in the *New York Times*, Nicholas Kristof lamented Stott's passing but with glowing affirmations of not only him but of evangelical Christianity as well. Kristof writes that “partly because of such self-righteousness [e.g., that of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson], the entire evangelical movement often has been pilloried among progressives as reactionary, myopic, anti-intellectual and, if anything, immoral. Yet that casual dismissal is profoundly unfair of the movement as a whole. It reflects a kind of reverse intolerance, sometimes a reverse bigotry, directed at tens of millions of people who have actually become increasingly engaged in issues of global poverty and justice.” Kristof holds up Stott as an example of what he means. He lauds his compassionate demeanor and his consistent counsel in his 50 books to emulate Jesus Christ, especially His concern for the poor and the oppressed. He also lauds Stott's challenge to confront the social evils of racial oppression and environmental pollution. Stott lived his faith and called for the church to confront the evils of culture in a manner that reflected kingdom values and priorities. In doing so, he often ruffled feathers, including those worn by fellow Christians. Listen to Kristof's characterization of evangelical Christianity: “. . . in reporting on poverty, disease and oppression, I've seen so many others. Evangelicals are disproportionately likely to donate 10% of their incomes to charities, mostly church-related. More important, go to the front lines, at home or abroad, in the battles against hunger, malaria, prison rape, obstetric fistula, human trafficking or genocide, and some of the bravest people you meet are evangelical Christians (or conservative Catholics, similar in many ways) who truly live their faith. I'm not particularly religious myself, but I stand in awe of those I've seen risking their lives in this way—and it sickens me to see that faith mocked at New York cocktail parties.”

As you read those words, were you somewhat shocked? I was! Kristof, politically liberal and “personally not religious,” has seen something in people of genuine biblical Christianity—they are living out what they believe. He is not listening especially to evangelical pronouncements about theology; he is seeing the transformational work they are doing for their Savior. Many centuries ago, Francis of Assisi said, “At all times preach the gospel—and if necessary, use words.”! That is what is causing a man like Kristof to take notice of something that he cannot explain—the transformed life: A life that is not selfish, or self-centered; instead, a life that is other-centered and willing to take enormous risks for the sake of others. That is why I admired John R.W. Stott so much. He was brilliant and incredibly gifted. He anchored his life around four propositions: 1.

God has spoken in His Word and it is completely trustworthy and authoritative. 2. The substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ is central to the gospel and without it there is no hope for humanity. 3. Jesus Christ is both Savior and Lord. 4. Those profound truths should produce a transformed life; one committed to evangelism and the pursuit of social justice. I did not always agree with everything Stott wrote but he was always worth reading. John R.W. Stott represented what Jesus called salt and light in a very dark world. Nicholas Kristof took notice of that light, which was really a light reflecting Jesus as Savior and Lord. I pray that Nicholas Kristof will one day place his faith in Jesus Christ. If he does, the memory and legacy of John R.W. Stott will have played a major role in his conversion. May God, in His mercy, bring this to pass.

See Kristof's essay in the *New York Times* (30 July 2011).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

Crisis Pregnancy Centers: Beacons of Light in Horrific Darkness

The city of San Francisco has declared war on crisis pregnancy centers in the Bay Area. The first element of attack is a bill introduced to the city's Board of Supervisors that would make it illegal for such centers to advertise falsely about their pregnancy-related services. Although California law already bans deceptive advertising, Malia Cohen, the bill's author, argued that the bill was necessary to protect low-income women drawn to such centers because of the free services offered there. She said, "We have a responsibility to protect our most vulnerable residents," and she accused crisis pregnancy centers of promoting "anti-abortion propaganda and mistruths on unsuspecting women." The second element of attack is from the San Francisco city attorney, Dennis Herrera, who has written a local center, called First Resort, about its advertisements, which, he said, "appear to be designed to confuse or mislead consumers." Herrera, a Democrat and candidate for mayor, declared his distaste for the crisis pregnancy center movement as "right wing, politically motivated" institutions whose mission is "to dissuade women from seeking their constitutionally protected rights." In fact, First Resort is clear that its mission is to offer "counseling and medical care to women who are making decisions about unplanned pregnancies." Shari Plunkett, director of First Resort, stated that all their clients had "full disclosure on the types of services we provide. We treat women with dignity and respect and respect their right to choose." Such an attack on the crisis pregnancy center movement is not isolated to San Francisco. This summer, New York City attempted something similar but in July a federal judge barred the ordinance that would have mandated that such centers state explicitly whether they offer abortions and whether they had licensed medical providers on staff. [Another federal judge struck down a similar ordinance in Baltimore.] How should we think about such attempts to stifle the work of crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) in America?

There is a fairness and equity issue when it comes to such ordinances. If local governments are successful in mandating that specific items be listed in promotional and advertising, then such cities must also mandate that abortion facilities clearly post that their primary business is abortion. Further, to say that crisis pregnancy centers engage in "anti-abortion propaganda" is silly and more politically motivated than the charge itself. Can anyone who is intellectually honest declare that Planned Parenthood is not engaged in propaganda? It is "left-wing" and "politically motivated." If one is truthful, Planned Parenthood is one of the most propagandistic of all reproductive clinics in

America. What is most upsetting to organizations such as Planned Parenthood and their political allies is that CPCs are now successfully utilizing sophisticated ultrasound technologies to show pregnant women the babies growing inside their wombs. Once a woman sees her baby, the chances of that baby being born are enhanced. Furthermore, the typical CPC offers a variety of services, ranging from counseling and adoption services to medical care and support for new mothers. In an article in the *New York Times* on CPCs and the efforts of city governments to stifle them, there is this lead sentence: “Seeking to stem what they call misleading advertising, San Francisco offices on Tuesday began a two-pronged attack on ‘crisis pregnancy centers,’ which are billed as places for pregnant women to get advice, but often use counseling to discourage abortions.” Theologian Albert Mohler observes correctly: “Look carefully at that sentence. The conjunction ‘but’ is intended to contrast the phrases linked together. Thus McKinley [the NYT reporter] writes that the crisis pregnancy centers ‘are billed as places for pregnant women to get advice,’ *but* they ‘often use counseling to discourage abortion.’ In other words, he insinuates that if crisis pregnancy centers ‘use counseling to discourage abortions,’ they are not ‘places for women to get advice.’ Evidently, the only acceptable ‘advice’ is counseling that encourages a woman to abort the baby within her.” McKinley’s article is hardly an objective analysis of the CPC movement. For years, my wife and I have supported our local CPC in Metro Omaha. Many lives have been saved through this ministry and it is abhorrent that several major cities are trying to stifle and curtail the CPCs across this nation. The CPC movement stands for the sanctity of life, the defense of the unborn and the right of free speech. San Francisco, New York City and Baltimore should be ashamed of themselves.

See Jesse McKinley in the *New York Times* (3 August 2011) and Albertmohler.com (5 August 2011).

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

The Debt-Ceiling Deal and the Downgrade of the US Credit Rating

The downgrading of the US credit rating from AAA to AA+ is significant, yet troubling. That different political groups within the US are trying to make “political hay” out of this is obvious. But this nation cannot permit politics to determine our response. This is serious but it is perhaps more of a symbol than anything actually that substantive. Even last year, it would have been unthinkable to see the credit rating of the United States downgraded! But, as I mentioned in last week’s *Issues in Perspective*, the US debt has grown enormously under the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Both Democrats and Republicans must accept equal blame for this disaster. This is not something that just developed since Obama became president. This crisis has been brewing over the last five years or so. It is not an issue of who is more responsible—Bush or Obama?—or even a debate over who has added more to the debt. This supreme issue is that this is the fault of both parties, both of whom have placed politics over the national good. Shame on both parties for this debacle.

Building on last week’s *Issues*, there are two additional thoughts:

- First, the debt-ceiling deal does not actually reduce federal spending. By the end of the 10-year deal, the federal debt will be much larger than it is today! Indeed, both the federal debt and the federal government itself will continue to grow faster than the US economy. Economists

disagree about the amount of debt a nation can safely carry relative to the size of its economy (i.e., gdp). Nonetheless, the concern is clear if a national approaches a 100% ratio. In other words, the weight of the debt suppresses economic activity. Stabilizing the ratio of GDP to debt would require about \$4 trillion in cuts over the next decade. This is the target that S & P declared the nation must meet. When it did not meet that, the downgrade resulted. [The deal posits about a \$2.1 trillion reduction.] The reality of this debt-ceiling deal is that it did not address any entitlement program issues, the largest by far drain on the US budget. The deal eliminated no programs, consolidated no duplicative programs, cut no tax earmarks, reformed no entitlement programs and did nothing to restructure the antiquated and counterproductive tax code. For all of these reasons, S & P downgraded the US credit rating. From my vantage point, my prayer is that this downgrade will motivate Washington to start serious analysis of our debt and seek to reduce it by, at the very least, \$4 trillion over the next decade.

- Second, the economist, Robert Samuelson, observes that the debt-ceiling deal “does reflect national priorities, for good or ill. It is mostly a triumph of the welfare state over the Pentagon.” He argues further that “the defense cuts show how, contrary to conventional wisdom, the budget deal reflects liberal preferences. The liberal agenda came in three parts: First, raise taxes on high-income Americans to limit domestic spending cuts; second, protect the social ‘safety net,’ especially Social Security and Medicare; and finally, cut defense spending to spare (again) domestic programs.” Therefore, as the debt-ceiling deal came down, the liberals got two out of their sacred three. They failed on the tax issue because the Republican Party regards tax issues as their political litmus test. Remember that retiree benefits constitute half of the non-interest federal outlays. Therefore, the deal is not that hard on government spending. Samuelson argues that “the real budget story is how protecting these vast retiree benefits dominate policymaking. If you shield almost half of spending and still want to cut, pressure intensifies on everything else.” Defense spending is a major one of these!

The current American welfare state constructed in the 20th century is based on three entitlements: Social Security, Medicare (and Medicaid for the poor) and Obama has added national health care. The result of these entitlements is utter dependency on the US government by the vast majority of its citizens. More than anything else, these entitlements explain our level of debt. When President Bush added the drug prescription program to Medicare and funded it with debt, we crossed a threshold on how we as a nation viewed entitlement benefits and revenue. For the first time in our history, a benefit was added to the population without any revenue tax to pay for it. The Social Security tax was not increased nor was the Medicare part of FICA increased. This was a reprehensible act on the part of President Bush and set the stage for the even more egregious act of President Obama on the health care legislation. As historian Niall Ferguson has observed, every major power began its decline when its debt became so cumbersome that the ratio to GDP and debt accelerated. When that ratio becomes unsustainable, nations cut into defense and they are no longer able to remain a major power. There are no exceptions to this paradigm. The United States has just crossed that threshold. It is very difficult to be optimistic about the United States and its role in the world over the next 10 to 15 years.

See Samuelson’s essay in the *Washington Post* (8 August 2011) and Binyamin Appelbaum in the *New York Times* (3 August 2011).