

# Basic Stott

In this cover story from 1996, evangelicalism's premier teacher speaks on gender, charismatics, leaving the Church of England, the poor, evangelical fragmentation, Catholics, the future, and other subjects.

**Roy McCloughry / SEPTEMBER 1, 2003**

## Eternal Punishment

You have fallen afoul of some evangelicals. Some of your reflections on the nature of eternal punishment were considered uncongenial to orthodoxy by some people.

In *Evangelical Essentials*, I described as "tentative" my suggestion that "eternal punishment" may mean the ultimate annihilation of the wicked rather than their eternal conscious torment. I would prefer to call myself agnostic on this issue, as are a number of New Testament scholars I know. In my view, the biblical teaching is not plain enough to warrant dogmatism. There are awkward texts on both sides of the debate.

The hallmark of an authentic evangelicalism is not the uncritical repetition of old traditions but the willingness to submit every tradition, however ancient, to fresh biblical scrutiny and, if necessary, reform.

How would you advise theologians to think creatively in the light of orthodoxy?

I don't think any of us is wise enough to express ourselves in a creative or questioning manner without first testing it within the Christian community. It is part of our loyalty to that community that we allow it to criticize or comment on what we may want to say.

## Dialogue with Liberals

In your debate with David Edwards, you both seemed to reach a genuine understanding of and respect for each other's positions. Do you think that evangelicals can learn from the liberal tradition?

David Edwards, a self-styled liberal, is crying out for a certain intellectual and academic freedom

that can move with the times and respond to what he continually calls "the climate of educated opinion today," without being tethered to anything more than the love of God manifested in Jesus of Nazareth. I don't think that's an unfair summary. But all the time he's pulling at the tether, and that's the great difference between us.

He would say that evangelicals have a poor doctrine of the Holy Spirit, because we don't think the Spirit is continuing to teach and to "lead us into all the truth." I believe that text, John 16:13, is the most misunderstood and manipulated text in the whole of the Bible, because every branch of Christendom claims it.

It's a key text for the Roman Catholic Church. "He will lead you into all the truth." Who is the "you" here? Roman Catholics would claim it refers to the bishops as successors of the apostles. The liberal quotes it, and the charismatic quotes it: "He'll lead me," they say. But even the most elementary hermeneutical principle would tell us that the "you" means the apostles. Jesus said, "I have much more to say to you, but you cannot bear it now." Who is he addressing? The apostles. "But when the Spirit comes, he will do what I have not been able to do; he will lead you into the truth which I wanted to give you but you weren't able to take it." It must be the apostles. We cannot change the identity of the "you" in the middle of the sentence.

So the fulfillment of that prophecy is in the New Testament. The major ministry of the Holy Spirit has been to lead the apostles into all the truth and to give us in the New Testament this wonderful body of truth that remains our authority. That does not mean that the ministry of the Holy Spirit has ceased. It means that the role of the Holy Spirit has changed from the revelation of new truth to giving us a profounder perception and application of old truth—from revelation to illumination, if you like.

Although I may be overstating it slightly, I want to say that God has no more to teach us than he has taught us in Christ. It is inconceivable that there should be a higher revelation than God has given in his incarnate Son. But although God has no more to teach us, we have a great deal more to learn. And although he has no more to give us than he has given us in Christ, we have a great deal more to receive.