



# Homiletics and Hermeneutics

Four Views on Preaching Today

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Edited by

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and **Matthew D. Kim**

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*To our colleagues in the  
Evangelical Homiletics Society*

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# Acknowledgments

This book comes as a result of a conversation between the two of us. Both of us were interested in the same thing—the hermeneutics behind the task of preaching. We decided that the project would be stronger if we did it together. Our intention was to select authors and compose a four-views book that would help carry forward the conversation about hermeneutics and homiletics.

We are grateful for the four authors who supply the conversation in this book: Bryan Chapell, Abraham Kuruvilla, Kenneth Langley, and Paul Scott Wilson. Thank you, authors and colleagues in the task of preaching, for your insights and contributions.

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To our readers, thank you for investing your thinking and theology in the reading of this book and the practice of preaching. You put the theoretical into practice every time you preach. We want you to know how grateful we are for what you do for the sake of the gospel. Thank you.

To our wives, Rhonda Gibson and Sarah Kim, thanks for your continued support and love as we press on in the research and practice of preaching. You two give us encouragement beyond what we deserve. We are thankful to God for you more than we can express. We love you.

Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim

# Introduction

SCOTT M. GIBSON AND MATTHEW D. KIM

Pastor Jacobs is preaching from Genesis 6 on the flood narrative. He wonders how he will deal with the connection of the acts of Noah to the New Testament. “How does the historical narrative of the Nephilim and Noah and the ark connect to the New Testament?” he wonders. Pastor Lopez sits in her study pondering how to preach about Proverbs 3:5–6. “Do I need to mention Jesus here?” she thinks to herself. Pastor Hobart is preaching from the book of Esther. He is struggling to incorporate the name of God when God’s name is not mentioned in the entirety of the book. Pastor Chung puzzles over his study of Jesus’s imperatives in the Sermon on the Mount. “Does Jesus’s message here include the laws of the Old Testament?” he queries. “What do I do with this pericope? Should it connect with other texts, too?” wonders Pastor Okafor.

Every preacher preaches out of an articulated or unarticulated perspective. The perspective might be methodological, theoretical, philosophical, cultural, sociological, or theological. Plenty of books have been written on the methods of preaching. Other books explore the theoretical side. Additionally, some focus on a philosophy of preaching. Still others engage the cultural or sociological aspects of the task. This book is about teasing out the theological presuppositions

of approaches to preaching. That is, we want to explore the hermeneutic that lies behind one's theology of preaching. We have chosen four hermeneutical approaches to preaching: redemptive-historic, christiconic, theocentric, and law-gospel. The authors for this volume represent a range of theological voices and expertise. Bryan Chapell, former president and chancellor of Covenant Theological Seminary and currently senior pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois, represents the redemptive-historic position. Abraham Kuruville, senior research professor of preaching and pastoral ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary, presents the christiconic (pericopal) theological approach. Third, Kenneth Langley, adjunct professor of preaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and senior pastor of Christ Community Church in Zion, Illinois, articulates the theocentric point of view. Finally, Paul Scott Wilson, professor of homiletics, Emmanuel College, University of Toronto, details the law-gospel perspective.

One may ask, "Why these four perspectives? Are there other points of view that are not included in this project? Why are these positions included while others are excluded?" First, these four perspectives reflect the current streams of thought in evangelical hermeneutics and homiletics. Second, these positions represent distinctive points of view, and by placing them in conversation with each other, we can discover the contours of their differences and similarities. Third, this project is not able to engage every nuance of hermeneutical interpretation for homiletics. The Pentecostal or charismatic perspectives are not addressed here. Their hermeneutical and homiletical positions are certainly worthy of exploration, but we have determined to limit the study to the four presented in this book.

The experts will present their hermeneutical positions: redemptive-historic, christiconic, theocentric, and law-gospel, respectively. The authors will interact with the following four categories in relation to their hermeneutical stance: a biblical rationale, a theological rationale, a homiletical rationale, and an applicational rationale. After each major hermeneutical perspective, each other contributor will respond from his theological position. In the final chapter, the editors will assess and engage with the hermeneutical and homiletical views presented by the authors.

One objective of this first-of-its-kind book is to present to our readers a robust discussion on the theological/hermeneutical approaches to preaching. Another goal is to encourage conversation among preachers who advocate different points of view. Third, we want readers to be able to answer this question: What can we learn from a theological tradition that is not our own? Finally, for those who have yet to articulate their own theological understanding of preaching, we intend for this book to provide a way to help readers determine their own preferred hermeneutical lens.

Our hope is that Pastors Jacobs, Lopez, Hobart, Chung, and Okafor, among many others, will be better able to determine and appreciate the place that hermeneutics has in their homiletics. By engaging with the hermeneutical positions presented by the authors in this book, preachers will be better equipped to preach texts with hermeneutical sensitivity. We also hope that our readers will grow in appreciation for others' hermeneutical traditions.





# Redemptive-Historic View

BRYAN CHAPPELL

## Historical Background

Fifty years ago, there would have been little demand for the discussions of this book among evangelical preaching instructors or pastors. Few expected or desired the discipline of biblical theology to

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For this chapter, I have excerpted freely from other works of mine: chaps. 10–11 in *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018); “Christ-Centered Sermons,” appendix 8 in *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); and the introduction to *The ESV Gospel Transformation Bible*, Bryan Chappell, gen. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), vii–xiii.

In addition, I have attempted to answer the four major concerns that are typically voiced about Christ-centered preaching: (1) that it is antinomian—I state as clearly as I am able that redemptive motivations do not deny the necessity of biblical obligations; (2) that it is allegorical—the concern that redemptive preaching tries to unveil some mention of Jesus in every passage is repeatedly shown to be unwarranted: well-informed expositors instead seek to show how all Scripture has a redemptive context that culminates in the ministry of Christ; (3) that it is egocentric—it simply cannot be the case that those who love Christ will neglect what and whom he loves; and (4) that it is *not* theocentric—I discuss the interrelationships of the Godhead that are most honored by Scripture’s own redemptive priorities.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the NIV.

cause a major rethinking of our approaches to preaching. Though that discipline's approach to unifying all of Scripture around the message of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ had once inspired church fathers, energized Reformation preaching, and empowered great awakenings of the gospel in this country, the redemptive train was off the tracks. Liberal theologians had hijacked key aspects of biblical theology, making evangelicals skeptical or opposed to its use.

Then, the pioneering work of preaching instructors such as Sidney Greidanus, Edmund Clowney, and John Sanderson reminded late-twentieth-century preachers that the unity of Scripture could not be dismissed without harming our understanding of its particulars. They pointed to early church fathers who took seriously what the gospels say about "all the Scriptures" disclosing the ministry of Christ (e.g., Luke 24:27; John 5:39). This insight had been abused, in ways that are now obvious to us, by ancient allegorism that sought to make Jesus "magically" appear in every Bible passage through exegetical acrobatics that stretched logic, imagination, and credulity. But Luther and Calvin, among others, recognized the abuses and attempted to offer corrections.

Luther's law-gospel distinctions and Calvin's forays into unifying the Testaments were imperfect but important excursions into unveiling the redemptive message culminating in Scripture. The writings of Bullinger, Oecolampadius, and Beza in surrounding decades helped refine and systematize a scriptural perspective that should have set the standard for redemptive interpretation in following eras. Sadly, Counter-Reformation battles regarding the nature of the church, justification, and the sacraments eclipsed the discussion of how the unity of Scripture's redemptive message should guide our preaching.

Later Dutch Reformers would revisit biblical theology and influence the Puritans, who took up the discussion again through key thinkers such as Jonathan Edwards. His quest for understanding how religious "affections" were stirred by the grace of the gospel led to a proposal to write a history of redemption that unified the whole Bible—a project short-circuited by his premature death.

The dormant discipline stirred again through the writings of Geerhardus Vos but declined quickly in evangelical favor as liberal theologians used select aspects of biblical theology to undermine

the veracity of Scripture. They argued that just as the “trajectory” of Old Testament scriptures pointed to a Christ beyond ancient expectations, so modern preachers could point beyond the canon of Scripture to disclose the “spirit of Jesus” for new concepts of faith and ethics. As a consequence, biblical theology was used to dispense with the clear teaching of the Scriptures and to advocate novel ideas beyond canonical boundaries. In essence, biblical theology became a weapon of “Liberalism” in the early twentieth century’s modernist/fundamentalist “Battle for the Bible,” and it became a perceived enemy of conservative Christianity.

Only after evangelicalism gained firmer ground in the 1960s and 1970s did key voices begin to remind the Bible-believing church of the far-reaching implications of our conviction that the proper interpretation of any text requires regard for its context. That context includes not only its literary and historical setting but also its place in God’s redemptive plan. Exegetical and doctrinal disciplines began to register the importance of the organic unity of Scripture for sound interpretation, and these insights inevitably affected our approach to preaching.

In the homiletics field, biblical theology proponents who had been crying in the wilderness for decades found fresh advocacy in the sermons of preachers such as Don Carson, Joel Nederhood, Sinclair Ferguson, John Piper, Steve Brown, James Montgomery Boice, Skip Ryan, Tony Merida, Jerry Bridges, Ray Ortlund, Joe Novenson, David Calhoun, Danny Akin, Ray Cortese, and most notably, Timothy Keller. Some preached out of an instinct for infusing grace into their messages; others had more systematized approaches. Some were consistent advocates; others felt their way forward more haltingly. But all contributed to a movement that has now swept beyond any anticipated academic, denominational, or generational boundaries.

Homiletics movements have since converged with currents in exegetical and theological disciplines, so that it is almost unthinkable that a new commentary on any portion of Scripture would fail to contextualize its contents within the redemptive flow of biblical history. Now, even if elementary preachers are unsure how to preach a particular passage redemptively, they have sensitive antennae to detect sermons that are mere moralistic challenges to straighten up, fly right, and do better.

## Biblical Rationale

### *Perspective*

The biblical theology movement in preaching has been driven by the core understanding that a message that merely advocates morality and compassion can remain sub-Christian even if the preacher proves that the Bible demands such behaviors. By ignoring the fallenness of our world and works that necessitate God's rescue (Isa. 64:6; Luke 17:10; Rom. 8:20), and by neglecting the grace of God that makes obedience possible and acceptable (1 Cor. 15:10; Eph. 2:8–9), such messages subvert the essence of the Christian gospel.

All other faiths teach that humans reach God by some measure of effort or mental state, but Christianity's unique claim is that God graciously reaches to us because of our inadequacy. The Bible teaches that our relationship with God is not based on what we do, but on what Christ has done—our faith is in his work, not ours (Gal. 2:20). Thus, a textually accurate description of biblical commands and ethical conduct does not guarantee Christian orthodoxy. Exhortations for moral behavior apart from the work of the Savior degenerate into mere Pharisaism, even if preachers advocate the actions with selected biblical evidence and good intent. Spirituality solely based on personal conduct cannot escape its human-centered orbit though it aspires to lift one to the divine.

### *Process*

But how do expository preachers infuse gospel essentials (i.e., how God is rescuing us from our fallenness) into every sermon without superimposing ideas foreign to many texts? Many Old Testament passages make no explicit reference to Christ's substitutionary, penal death or bodily resurrection. New Testament texts abound that commend moral behaviors with no mention of the cross, the resurrection, the Holy Spirit, or God's enabling grace. Can we really be "expositors" and bring out of a text what it does not *seem* to mention? The answer lies in an old preaching axiom: Context is part of text.

By identifying where a passage fits in the overall revelation of God's redemptive plan, a preacher relates the text to Christ by performing

the standard and necessary exegetical task of establishing its context. Following the creation passages at the outset of Genesis, all of Scripture unfolds a record of God's dealings with a corrupted world and its creatures (Gen. 3:15). But the record does not merely recite historical facts. It reveals an ongoing drama whereby God systematically, personally, and progressively discloses the necessity and the detail of his plan to use his Son to redeem and restore fallen humanity and creation itself (Rom. 15:4).<sup>1</sup>

The big story of Scripture moves through the stages of creation, fall, redemption, and final consummation—God made everything good, everything went bad, and, in God's time, everything will be made perfect. But until that time, all human history subsequent to the fall (including our own history) unfolds within the context of God's redemptive plan. The Bible is the revelation of that plan, and no scripture can be fully interpreted without considering that context.

Just as historico-grammatical exegesis requires a preacher to consider a text's terms in their historical and literary context, responsible theological interpretation requires an expositor to discern how a text's ideas function in the wider redemptive context. Some meanings we discern by taking out our exegetical magnifying glass and studying a text's particulars in close detail. Other meanings we discern by examining a text with a theological fish-eye lens to see how the immediate text relates to texts, messages, events, and developments around it. Accurate expositors use both a magnifying glass and a fish-eye lens, knowing that a magnifying glass can unravel mysteries in a raindrop but can fail to expose a storm gathering on the horizon.

## Theological Rationale

### *Principles*

In the introduction to his seminal volume *Biblical Theology*, Geerhardus Vos outlined the principles that will keep preaching on track. He began with the simple observation that “revelation is a noun of

1. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 5–7; Julius J. Kim, *Preaching the Whole Counsel of God: Design and Deliver Gospel-Centered Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 68–69.

action relating to divine activity.”<sup>2</sup> All scriptural revelation discloses God. In its proper context, every verse in the Bible in some sense points to his nature and work. Yet because God is God, no single verse, no single passage, no single book contains all we need to know about him. In fact, had God totally revealed himself to our earliest faith ancestors, they would not have had the theological background or the biblical preparation necessary to take in all that God has since disclosed to humanity about himself. For this reason, God’s revelation through biblical history is *progressive*, *organic*, and *redemptive*.

### PROGRESSIVE

Vos first observed that the redemptive message of Scripture gets clearer over time. This progressive principle of biblical revelation does not imply that early revelation in any sense contradicts what God ultimately reveals. What Samson understood about God’s purposes was not wrong, but Paul understands more. God unfolds the message of Scripture in such a way as to allow his people to progress in their understanding of his nature and purposes.<sup>3</sup>

### ORGANIC

Says Vos, “The progressive process is *organic*: revelation may be in seed form which yields later full growth accounting for diversity but not true difference because the earlier aspects of the truth are indispensable for understanding the true meanings of the later forms and vice versa.”<sup>4</sup> Everything is tied together. God uses each verse, each recorded event, and each passing epoch of biblical history to build a single, comprehensive understanding of who he is. Even though an aspect of God’s revelation of himself may not be in full bloom in some portion of Scripture, that does not mean that the truth is not present in “seed form.” Earlier portions of Scripture help prepare us to understand later portions, and later portions clarify the purpose and meaning of the earlier. They help explain each other.

2. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 5.

3. Phillip Jensen and Paul Grimmond, *The Archer and the Arrow: Preaching the Very Words of God* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias, 2010), 82–83.

4. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 7.

## REDEPTIVE

The seed form instruction in Scripture does not necessarily appear as a propositional statement such as would appear in a systematic theology textbook. Our understanding of who God is remains inextricably bound to what he has done. Writes Vos, “Revelation is inseparably linked to the activity of redemption. . . . Revelation is the interpretation of redemption.”<sup>5</sup> This means that for us to expound any passage of biblical revelation accurately, we must relate it to the unfolding message of humanity’s rescue from our fallen nature and world.<sup>6</sup>

### Goals

God’s revelation is not simply cataloging his attributes or constructing a behavior manual. God is revealing himself through his interaction with his people in the context of a redemptive history that displays his gracious nature. In this sense, the entire Bible is Christ centered because Christ’s redemptive work—in all of its incarnational, atoning, rising, interceding, and reigning dimensions—is the capstone of God’s revelation of his dealings with his people. No aspect of revelation can be fully understood or explained in isolation from God’s redeeming work that culminates in Christ’s ministry.<sup>7</sup>

Christ-centered preaching, rightly understood, does not seek to discover where Christ is mentioned in every biblical text but to disclose where every text stands in relation to Christ’s ministry.<sup>8</sup> The goal of the preacher is not to find novel ways of making Jesus appear in every text (we should not need a magic wand or a decoder ring to interpret Scripture), but to show how each text manifests God’s

5. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 5, 6.

6. Douglas J. Moo, “The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 321.

7. Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 58; J. Kim, *Preaching the Whole Counsel of God*, 52–61.

8. John Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews 6:1–7:28*, vol. 21 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991), 436–37. See modern reflections of similar concepts in Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 10; Keller, *Preaching*, 70–90.

grace in order to prepare and enable his people to embrace the hope provided by Christ.

Many times I have been asked whether this understanding requires the preacher to mention Jesus in every sermon. I have great respect for those who ask because they are conscience bound that a Christ-centered approach should not force them to impose on Scripture what it does not say. I consistently respond, “No, I do not think there is a biblical mandate to name Jesus in every sermon.” Then I quickly add, “But why wouldn’t you?”

While there is an undeniable logic that well-taught Christians may contextualize Scripture’s imperatives and instruction within a redemptive worldview, so that we don’t have to “spell it out” for them every time, pastoral realities teach another obligation. Even when we preach grace, most people hear law. The human reflex is self-justifying and transactional (i.e., “I’ll do what God requires, and that’s why he will be nice to me”). If we fail to mention Christ’s provision this week, and next week, and the next week, because the text makes no explicit reference to him, should we really expect our listeners to maintain grace-filled patterns of thought?

Mentioning Jesus’s name is not magic. That’s not the point. We also teach our people that prayer “in Jesus’s name” maintains biblical priorities, but we don’t argue God will not hear a desperate “God help us” uttered as an eighteen-wheeler veers toward the family car. Just because Jesus’s name is not mentioned does not negate our prayers, but that doesn’t mean that it is wise consistently to approach the Father apart from the ministry of the Son. So also pastors should know that God can bless sermons that only insist on more duties to perform and doctrines to affirm. But why would we adopt a pattern of preaching that risks communicating that God is only concerned about our greater performance and competence, when the redemptive context of every text gives us such liberty and incentive to preach Christ?

### *Precedent*

Jesus identified the redemptive focus of all Scripture when he walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, after his



resurrection. There, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27; cf. 24:44 and John 5:39, 46). Jesus related all portions of Scripture to his own ministry. This does not mean that every phrase, punctuation mark, or verse directly reveals Christ, but rather that all passages in their context serve our understanding of his nature and/or necessity.

What Jesus verbally said on the road to Emmaus was visually displayed on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17). When the archetypal representatives of the Old Testament law and prophets, Moses and Elijah, appeared with Jesus, they showed that all preceding Scripture directs the believer’s gaze to this One. Thus, Jesus is the apex and culmination of Scripture’s testimony.<sup>9</sup> The law and the prophets that precede and the apostolic ministries that follow the work of the cross center us on Christ’s ministry. Prophets, apostles, and the Savior testify that all Scripture ultimately focuses on the Redeemer our God provides to rescue us from our fallenness (Matt. 11:13–15). How then can we rightly expound Scripture’s passages and not relate them to the grace that culminates in Christ? Expository preaching is Christ-centered preaching.

## Homiletical Rationale

### *Methods*

A common concern about Christ-centered preaching is that it will lead to the allegorical abuses of past eras, when preachers tried to make texts refer to Christ by imaginative connections that had no expository foundation—for example, claiming that the wood of Noah’s ark represented the cross of Christ, or that the parting of the Red Sea prefigures the division of the sheep and goats at Christ’s second coming. Lest we think redemptive interpretation requires such illogical leaps, it is appropriate at this juncture to begin identifying approaches that lead to more faithful exposition of a text.

9. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.6.3. See also Tony Merida, *Faithful Preaching: Declaring Scripture with Responsibility, Passion and Authenticity* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 45.

### TEXT DISCLOSURE

A text may *directly refer* to Christ or to an aspect of his messianic work. Jesus or his saving activity may be mentioned in a Gospel account, a messianic psalm, an epistle's development, or a prophetic utterance. In such cases, the task of the expositor is plain: explain the reference in terms of the redemptive activity it reveals. But, though many biblical passages specifically mention Christ's person and work, many more do not. What other alternatives may preachers pursue to stay Christ centered in their preaching?

### TYPE DISCLOSURE

God's redemptive work in Christ may also be evident in Old Testament *types*. Typology as it relates to Christ's person and work is the study of the correspondences between persons, events, and institutions that first appear in the Old Testament and persons, events, and institutions in the New Testament that more fully express salvation truths.<sup>10</sup> Debates have swirled through the centuries over what constitutes a legitimate type and what merely reflects an interpreter's overactive imagination.<sup>11</sup> Current research into literary methods and structures promises to enhance our understanding of biblical typology.<sup>12</sup> The consensus already shared by most biblical interpreters, who are committed to the authority of Scripture, is that where New Testament writers specifically cite or unmistakably echo how an Old Testament person or feature prefigures the person and work of Christ—as with Adam, David, the exodus, the

10. Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms: Foundations for Expository Sermons in the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 33, 35; Tony Merida, *The Christ-Centered Expositor: A Field Guide for Word-Driven Disciple Makers* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 147; David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 166; Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton: Victor, 1994), 153–60.

11. Stanley Gundry, "Typology as Means of Interpretation: Past and Present," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1969): 233–40.

12. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 170–89; Grant Osborne, "Type, Typology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 903–4.

Passover, and the temple—a preacher may safely use typological exposition.<sup>13</sup>

### CONTEXT DISCLOSURE

Texts that specifically mention Jesus’s ministry or reveal it typologically are few relative to the thousands of passages that contain no direct reference to Christ.<sup>14</sup> How can a preacher remain Christ centered and expository when dealing with these apparently Christ-silent texts? When neither text nor type discloses the Savior’s work, a preacher must rely on *context* to develop the redemptive focus of a message.

A passage retains its christocentric focus not because a preacher finds a slick way of wedging a reference to Jesus’s person or work into the message but because the sermon identifies a function that the text legitimately serves in the great drama of God’s redemptive plan.

This mature view of Christ-centered preaching warns preachers not to believe they have properly expounded a text simply because they have identified something in it that reminds them of an event in Jesus’s life and ministry. When a preacher uses a geographical reference to a well in the Old Testament to introduce a discussion of Jesus’s conversation with the woman at the well, no real explanation of the original passage’s place and meaning in redemptive history has occurred. The preacher has only engaged in a bit of wordplay. The same is true when a preacher leapfrogs to the New Testament from a feature of Moses’s law or an event in Israel’s kingship simply because a detail in the account seems similar to something Christ did.

13. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 224–25; J. Kim, *Preaching the Whole Counsel of God*, 78–79; Keller, *Preaching*, 80–82; Gordon P. Hugenberger, “Introductory Notes on Typology,” in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 337–41; Dennis Johnson, *Walking with Jesus through His Word: Christ-Centered Bible Study* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), chap. 3; Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 100–112; Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1988), 14–16.

14. Of course, the number will vary greatly depending on how one defines a type. Cf. the implication of Gerard Van Groningen’s discussion of the wide and narrow notions of the messianic concept in *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 19–23.

Searching out mysterious or coded “messianic lights” in precrucifixion texts in order to make some reference to the incarnation, atonement, or resurrection of Jesus is *not* the expository goal of Christ-centered preaching.<sup>15</sup> Since Scripture as a whole is God’s revelation of his redeeming activity in Jesus Christ,<sup>16</sup> a preacher needs to demonstrate where and how a particular text functions in the redemptive plan.

In its context, every passage possesses one or more of four redemptive foci (that we need not keep strictly segregated for our understanding). The text may be

- predictive of the work of Christ
- preparatory for the work of Christ
- resultant from the work of Christ, and/or
- reflective of the work of Christ

These categories do not exhaust the possibilities of how texts may reveal the redemptive work of God, but they do provide dependable means of exploration and explanation.

*Predictive.* Some passages *predict* God’s redemptive work in Christ by specifically mentioning his coming person or work. Messianic psalms and passages from prophetic and apocalyptic literature provide many examples. A sermon from Isaiah 40 that offers comfort to God’s people without mention of Christ’s coming plainly misses the future source of comfort the passage identifies in its context. Interpreting Old Testament passages without considering how their features anticipate Christ’s ministry actually diminishes reverence for the organic nature of Scripture.<sup>17</sup>

*Preparatory.* The inspired intention of some texts that do not specifically mention Jesus is to *prepare* the people of God to understand aspects of the person and/or work of Christ. We would not

15. Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament*, 143.

16. Vos, “Idea of Biblical Theology,” inaugural address upon assuming the new Chair of Biblical Theology at Princeton Seminary, available in Covenant Seminary Library, n.d. (1895 probable), 11, 14. See also J. Kim, *Preaching the Whole Counsel of God*, 58–64.

17. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 7–8.

understand many aspects of Christ's New Testament ministry if the Old Testament had not prepared us with accounts of the activities of the prophets, priests, and kings who preceded him. Exodus events, temple sacrifices, foreign adoptions, merciful pardons, providential rescues, and a host of other features and exemplars (both positive and negative) in narrative, precept, prose, and poetry tune the hearts and minds of God's people to receive the Redeemer's work at its appointed time.

By such means, Old Testament believers were not only to anticipate characteristics of the coming Savior but also to discern their need of faith in the Redeemer. Key to this understanding were the Old Testament accounts that consistently reinforced the message of all persons' inability to keep any divine imperative perfectly (Gal. 2:15–21).<sup>18</sup> Exposition on the law that fails to make this point advances an implicit legalism and misses the explanation that the Bible itself offers for God's commands.<sup>19</sup> People today must recognize that neither a sophisticated understanding of a commandment nor the most vigorous attempts to heed it will merit grace. Comprehensive explanation of what God requires falls short of adequate exposition if it fails to say why God set the standard.

*Resultant.* Scripture includes many instructions that can be mistakenly preached as conditions for divine love and acceptance. Such preaching errs not by detailing what God requires but by implying, if not directly stating, that a relationship with God is a consequence of obedience.<sup>20</sup> The true gospel proclaims that obedience itself is

18. Vern Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1991), 104–6; Keller, *Preaching*, 49–52, 71.

19. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.7.1–3, 2.7.9.

20. To be sure, some passages *seem* to present a conditional character to God's love for his children. However, in such cases the interpreter almost always will gain a more biblically consistent and spiritually healthy perspective on the passage either by (1) properly identifying the subjects of the apparently conditional love as unregenerate persons whose acceptance depends entirely on their works rather than on the finished work of Christ (Matt. 12:31; John 15:1–8); (2) understanding Scripture simply to be stating what is (or will be) the situation of those *characterized* by such behavior rather than by establishing a cause-and-effect relationship between a particular action and God's love—statement of fact versus statement of cause (Matt. 7:1–2; 18:35; Heb. 10:26); (3) understanding that the biblical writer may be speaking of the instrumentality by which blessings come rather than the merit by which they

a blessing that *results* from God's love for us. The love we have for him that is engendered by deep apprehension and appreciation of his unconditional mercy (made available through Christ alone) stimulates our desire and efforts in obedience. Still, even this desire and ability to do what he requires is of his Spirit and is never cause for behaving as though our actions put God in our debt (Rom. 8:5–13; 11:35–36; 1 John 2:15–16). Many passages that describe the privileges or blessings of obedience cannot be rightly interpreted without an explanation that makes them an ultimate result of what Christ has done in us rather than a direct result of what we do (e.g., Col. 1:29).

Divine love made conditional upon human obedience is mere legalism, even if the actions commended reflect biblical commands. The only obedience approved by God is that which he himself enables and sanctifies through the union with Christ he provides.<sup>21</sup> For example, my prayers in themselves cannot earn, deserve, or require God's blessing. God will be no one's debtor (Job 41:11). God is pleased by sincere prayers, and he promises to bless according to his purpose what is offered in obedience to him. However, though my prayers may be the instrument by which God blesses, the merit of my prayers is never the basis of his care. With their mix of human motives and their reflection of my own frail wisdom and resolve, my prayers could never by their own worth determine or demand a holy God's blessing.<sup>22</sup>

I pray not to gain or earn my righteousness, but as a result of the access to the Father that Jesus provides for me (and allows me to use) by his death, resurrection, and continuing intercession. Thus, the writer of Hebrews enjoins, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us . . . then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (4:14, 16). God mercifully receives and honors prayer humbly

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are earned; (4) discerning that the writer is exhibiting means by which God shows his approval of the obedience he inspires in his children rather than the means by which we are made or maintained as his children (Heb. 11:6; James 5:16); or (5) determining the doctrinal idea a biblical writer wants to communicate through a hypothetical situation understood by the writer to be impossible (a common though debated approach to Heb. 6:4–6).

21. Westminster Confession of Faith, 16.2–6.

22. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.15.3.

offered in love to him not because our prayers are inordinately good but because he is surpassingly gracious.

The promised blessings of prayer (as well as the opportunity for fellowship with God) encourage my obedience in offering prayer, but the acceptance of the offering is a result of Christ's ministry and not the sufficiency of my sincerity or diligence. To segregate a scripture promise regarding the blessings of prayer from mention of Jesus is to consign Christian prayer to the same hopeless and self-righteous folly of spinning prayer wheels and reciting incantations.

To preach matters of faith or practice without rooting their foundation or fruit in what God would do, has done, or will do through the ministry of Christ creates a human-centered (anthropocentric) faith without Christian distinctions. Truly Christian preaching must proclaim, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, *because* through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:1–2).

Christ's work unites us to him and releases us from the guilt and the power of our fallen condition. Now what we do in faith as those whose pasts he sanctifies, whose resolves he strengthens, and whose futures he secures must be seen as a result of what he has done and is doing in and through us (1 Cor. 15:16–17, 58; Phil. 2:12–13; 1 Pet. 4:10–11). Every aspect, action, and hope of the Christian life finds its motive, strength, and source in Christ, or it is not of Christ. The truths of Scripture that do not anticipate or culminate in Christ's ministry must at least be preached as a consequence of his work, or we rip them from the context that identifies them with the Christian message.<sup>23</sup>

Proper exposition does not discover its Christ focus by disposing of a passage's teaching or by imposing Jesus on a text. Christ-centered preaching identifies the role of a text in the Bible's full testimony of God's gracious character, instruction, and actions, which are

23. Murray Capill, *The Heart Is the Target: Preaching Practical Application from Every Text* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), 228–33; Thomas F. Jones, "Preaching the Cross of Christ" (essay presented at the homiletics lectures, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1976–77), 1; and Jay E. Adams, *Preaching with Purpose: A Comprehensive Textbook on Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 152.

ultimately manifested in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20; Rev. 22:13).<sup>24</sup> Expository preaching need not mention Golgotha, Bethlehem, or the Mount of Olives to remain Christ centered. As long as a preacher uses a text's statements or context to expose the theological truths or historical facts that demonstrate the ultimate necessity of God's grace, Christ assumes his rightful place as the focus of the message.<sup>25</sup>

*Reflective.* The path to implicit aspects of the gospel of grace that are embedded in every biblical passage does not require tortuous expeditions of logic. When a text neither plainly predicts, prepares for, nor results from the Redeemer's work, then an expositor should simply explain how the text *reflects* key facets of the redemptive message. This is by far the most common tool for constructing Christ-centered messages when there is no direct reference to Jesus's person or work.

### *Gospel Glasses*

A preacher who asks the following basic questions takes no inappropriate liberties with a text: What does this text reflect of God's nature that provides redemption? What does this text reflect of human nature that requires redemption? Asking what a text reflects of God's nature and our nature is not an unfair or unnatural approach to any biblical text. Such questions do not impose the New Testament on the Old Testament or overlay the text with prejudicial theology. Without doing damage to the integrity, authority, and exegesis of a passage, these questions act as lenses to form a set of gospel glasses that enable us to view every text redemptively.

If we ask, "What does the commandment 'You shall not steal' reflect of the nature of God?" we will ultimately discern that he is holy. If we ask, "What does the commandment 'You shall not steal' reflect about me?" we will ultimately conclude that the prohibition against ever taking anything that is not our own marks each of us as a thief. The commandment reveals that God is holy and that I am a thief. And to make matters worse, the Bible says that if I have broken one commandment then I am guilty of breaking all (James 2:10). There is a problem here that I, as a fallen creature, cannot fix.

24. See Clowney, *Unfolding Mystery*, 9–16.

25. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 145.



That is why the apostle Paul said that even the Old Testament law leads us to Christ (Gal. 3:24). So also will the spiritual instruction stated or implied in every biblical command, historical account, or poetic encouragement.

With our gospel glasses in place we will see “the great disproportion” between our best works and God’s holiness.<sup>26</sup> This will also enable us to perceive our need for God to make some provision so that we can be reconciled to him and/or can do what he requires. Gospel glasses used throughout Scripture equip us to focus on the glimmers of grace consistently reflected as God provides for those who cannot provide for themselves.

These gospel glasses are not X-ray goggles that make an image or reference to Jesus mysteriously emerge from behind some bush in every biblical account. Rather, they enable us to see reflected aspects of divine character that provide the grace of God ultimately manifested in the person and work of Christ, and/or to see our fallen nature, which requires such grace. If we consistently ask these two interpretive questions, then we need never pretend that all texts specifically mention Jesus or ever deny that they lead our hearts to him. As we demonstrate how every text reflects aspects of or needs for God’s grace that are made plain in the fullness of time, we honor the unity of Scripture, God’s progressive plan of redemption, and the many ways that the Holy Spirit coordinates the whole Bible to reveal the grace of the Savior and the futility of any other hope.<sup>27</sup>

As a reminder, these gospel glasses may reveal redemptive truths reflected in seed form, as well as in mature form. Grace may be reflected in a direct New Testament statement of Christ’s work through the cross and resurrection (e.g., 1 Pet. 2:24). Grace may also appear in Old Testament clothes woven from the fabric of persons and events that the Holy Spirit uses to reflect the redemptive character of God. Whenever God is providing for those who cannot provide for themselves (supplying food for the hungry, strength to the weak, rest for the weary, pardon for the sinful, faithfulness to the unfaithful, etc.), he is displaying the grace that will reflect more fully in the ministry

26. Westminster Confession of Faith, 16.5.

27. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 5–6.

of the Savior. Yet whether a preacher gleans these conclusions from the historical sweep of Scripture, from a passage's specific doctrinal statements, from a literary echo, or from God's relational interaction with his people, the redemptive themes must be harvested lest preaching sow mere moral commentary and reap Pharisaism as its inevitable fruit.<sup>28</sup>

### *Gospel Approaches*

I have lingered on this discussion of how the grace of God that culminates in Christ may be "reflected" in God's *relational* dealings with his people because I consider this to be both the easiest and most common approach for redemptive preaching from all Scripture. When I first began teaching the impact of biblical theology on preaching, this was not so. My models were the pioneers who rescued the redemptive-historical method from liberal theology that had held it hostage for a half century. Yet I discovered that, although my students appreciated that big picture of redemption, they struggled to know how to preach individual passages every week (i.e., Did they have to go from Genesis to Revelation every week, and how can you be sure about your interpretation of a particular passage's role in all of redemptive history?).

The *historical* approach has remained foundational for all in the biblical theology movement,<sup>29</sup> but approaches have become more diverse as the movement has matured and its preachers have multiplied. Some whose instinct and inclinations are more *doctrinal* have become skilled at demonstrating how Scripture discloses redemptive

28. Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), pt. 2.6; Merida, *Christ-Centered Expositor*, 61–64, 72–75; Kenneth J. Howell, "How to Preach Christ from the Old Testament," *Presbyterian Journal* 16 (January 1985): 8–9.

29. For predominantly *historical* approaches to redemptive preaching, see Geerhardus Vos, introduction to *Biblical Theology*; the early writings of Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge, 1970); Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994).

themes in statements or actions that illuminate or presage New Testament doctrines (such as justification by faith being shown in the righteousness that was credited to Abraham, or the mercy of God for sinners demonstrated in God's instruction for Hosea to keep taking Gomer back as his wife).<sup>30</sup> Finally, a category of redemptive preachers has become particularly skilled at showing the unity of Scripture's purpose by using *literary* motifs (images, actions, or phrases that are echoed from the Old Testament to the New).<sup>31</sup>

Each of these approaches (historical, doctrinal, and literary) brings wonderful insights and skills to the task of proclaiming the redemptive thrust of Scripture. Our redemptive interpretation tool bag has gotten more full and varied to serve the different personalities who preach and the different kinds of passages that need to be preached. Still, I have watched my students question and stumble a bit as they have tried to imitate the methods of some of the great, contemporary practitioners of these redemptive approaches. So, as I have commended the preaching and approaches of all of these methods, I have also encouraged my students and myself not to forget how easy it is for us to put on our gospel glasses. When we use the lenses of those glasses to ask, "What does this text reveal about the nature of God and what does it reveal about me?" we will readily see and confidently explain how God provides for those who cannot provide for themselves. In this *relational* interaction, the grace of God that

30. For largely *doctrinal* approaches to redemptive preaching, see D. A. Carson, *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010); Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999); Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2011); Piper, *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2012); Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

31. For skilled *literary* approaches to redemptive preaching, see Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* and *Unfolding Mystery*; Timothy Keller, *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Dutton, 2011); Keller, *Preaching*, 58–90; the later writings of Sidney Greidanus, especially *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*; Warren Gage, *Milestones to Emmaus: The Third Day Resurrection in the Old Testament* (Fort Lauderdale: St. Andrews House, 2015); Gage, *The Gospel of Genesis: Studies in Protology and Eschatology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001).

culminates in Christ's ministry almost always beacons clearly and powerfully.

### *Theocentricity*

Exposition is Christ centered when it discloses God's redemptive nature as our Provider, Deliverer, and Sustainer whether or not Jesus is mentioned more than the Father or the Holy Spirit. Jesus is not the only member of the Trinity to be named in a sermon because he is not the only member mentioned in our biblical texts. We should not worry, however, that a Christ focus diminishes the Father or the Holy Spirit.<sup>32</sup> Everyone who "abides in" the message of Christ's ministry "has both the Father and the Son" (2 John 9 ESV). We gain "knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6 ESV; cf. Heb. 13:8). And the earthly mission of the Spirit who proceeds from the Father is to bear witness to Christ (John 15:26).<sup>33</sup> Focus on the Son does not obscure the Father, of whom Jesus is the "exact representation" (Heb. 1:3); centering on Christ does not sideline the Spirit, whose mission is to glorify our Savior (John 16:12–14).<sup>34</sup>

A Christ-centered message is automatically theocentric because it reveals the glory of the Father and fulfills the mission of the Spirit. But the contrary is not true—focus upon the Father without reference to his redemption that is fulfilled in the Son, or focus upon the Spirit that does not honor his purpose of bearing witness to Christ, damages our witness to the glory of each member of the Trinity. As

32. See such expressions of concern in Ken Langley, "When Christ Replaces God at the Center of Preaching," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* (2008), [http://ehomiletics.com/willhite/2008\\_langley.pdf](http://ehomiletics.com/willhite/2008_langley.pdf); Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 82–83; Kaiser, "Must Every Sermon Focus on Jesus?," Christianity.com, June 10, 2011, <http://www.christianity.com/god/jesus-christ/must-every-lesson-or-sermon-focus-on-jesus-christ-11596060.html>; and, as discussed by Jason Keith Allen, "The Christ-Centered Homiletics of Edmund Clowney and Sidney Greidanus in Contrast with the Human Author-Centered Hermeneutics of Walter Kaiser" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011).

33. J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1994), 52–53, 66.

34. Keller, *Preaching*, 17; Pierre Marcel, *The Relevance of Preaching*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor, ed. William Childs Robinson (New York: Westminster, 2000), 90; Packer, *Keep in Step*, 66.

Geerhardus Vos taught, God’s revelation of himself in Scripture is “inseparably linked to the activity of redemption,” and revelation is “the interpretation of redemption.”<sup>35</sup> The metanarrative matters. The mission of God is to reveal his glory through the ministry of his Son, whom the Spirit enables us to perceive and receive.<sup>36</sup> Supposed theocentric exposition of a text that does not refer to the redemptive revelation that culminates in Christ truncates the text, misunderstands its design, and diminishes the means by which the Trinity is most glorified.

Theocentric preaching necessitates christocentric commentary not because fairness requires equal time for each person of the Godhead but because any “Christian” sermon must exegete Scripture to show the reality of the human predicament that requires divine solution *and* identifies that solution.<sup>37</sup> A focus on God’s redemptive activity alerts the human heart to its necessity, reveals the gracious character of God, and inevitably brings Christ’s ministry into view (John 1:1–3, 14, 18; 14:7–10; Col. 1:15–20; Heb. 1:1–3).<sup>38</sup>

Without this redemptive perspective guiding our interpretation, any number of other worldviews could be overlaid on Scripture that are contrary to its central theme. With this perspective of God’s overarching redemptive plan (and Scripture’s organic presentation of it), each person, precept, and event in the biblical record assumes its proper role in faithful exposition.<sup>39</sup>

Preachers will not present biblical patriarchs whose conduct was often far from exemplary as perfect models for listeners to emulate. The ancient saints will be presented as God intended—hopelessly

35. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 5–6.

36. Arturo G. Azurdia III, *Spirit Empowered Preaching* (Ross-Shire, UK: Mentor, 2007), 52.

37. Azurdia, *Spirit Empowered Preaching*, 12–13. See also Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 143–44; Michael Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 114–16.

38. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.6.4.

39. Jonathan Edwards, in his remarkable “Letter to the Trustees of the College of New Jersey,” proposes such an approach to all of Scripture “considering the affair of Christian Theology, as the whole of it, in each part, stands in reference to the great work of redemption by Jesus Christ” as the “summum and ultimum of all divine operations and decrees.” See Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: American Book, 1935), 411–12.

fallen creatures whose faith and favor are entirely the product of God's mercy and deliverance.<sup>40</sup>

Sermons on the law will not merely detail moral precepts but will show the contemporary people of God what the standards were intended to teach: the necessity of divine dependence as well as holy conduct (Gal. 3:24).<sup>41</sup> Preachers will not inadvertently teach that God's acceptance depends on our righteousness, given that the Scriptures consistently demonstrate that the law itself pointed to the need of a greater provision of righteousness than human accomplishment.

Messages on the times of the judges and kings will remove the veils we so often put over these leaders to shield their reputations from their glaring flaws. Preachers will then more freely herald all dimensions of the biblical characters, understanding that human weaknesses underscore the necessity of a righteousness that comes from God.<sup>42</sup>

New Testament instructions on marriage, stewardship, church relationships, and worship practices will not be allowed to function as aberrant reinstitutions of Old Testament law, qualifying God's people for his approval. Instead, all biblical standards (whether presented by written precept or human example) will function as God intends—guiding God's people into the paths that reflect his glory, promote their good, and satisfy their souls as the natural outflow of loving thankfulness for what he has done or will do on their behalf.

Grace-focused preaching that neglects the moral and ethical aspects of God's law that are a gracious expression of his character and care denies his people the safe and good path he intends for their lives. The necessity of applying these rules with the motivation and enablement of his grace should in no way diminish the necessity

40. Keller, *Preaching*, 75–80; J. Kim, *Preaching the Whole Counsel of God*, 70–72; Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 80. See also Clowney, "Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures," in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1986), 163–91.

41. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.7; 2.10.3–5.

42. For excellent discussion of how God's redemptive truths are presented in the various epochs and genres of Scripture, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* and *Preaching the Whole Bible*; J. Kim, *Preaching the Whole Counsel of God*, 67–137.

of presenting God's standards in our sermons.<sup>43</sup> In Christ-centered preaching, the rules do not change, but the reasons do. Preachers encourage obedience as a response to grace, rather than as a qualification for it—motivating and enabling application of God's Word with the redemptive resources of Scripture.

## Applicational Rationale

### *Motivation*

Often scholarly discussion of the necessity of Christ-centered exposition terminates in a debate about hermeneutical preferences, but preachers cannot end the discussion there. We must consider the consequences of our interpretations upon the application of our sermons. Nowhere are the effects of Christ-centered exposition more apparent than when preachers proclaim the motivations for their sermons' applications.<sup>44</sup> There are two common errors regarding biblical motivation: the first is when preachers do not acknowledge a plurality of motivations in Scripture; the second is when preachers do not recognize there is a priority of motivations. The plurality of motivations discussed below reflects the priority of Scripture by the order of presentation.

### A LOVE FOR GOD

Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with

43. With great respect for my friend and colleague Walt Kaiser, I kindly insist that his concern that Christ-centered preaching results in "a Christo-exclusive or an exclusive Redemptive Historical approach to Scripture," neglecting the standards or context of "what the Scriptures explicitly teach," is a straw man that, happily, does not represent the practice or priorities of the mainstream of redemptive-historic preaching. See Walter Kaiser Jr., "Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: Jesus in Every Scripture," *Christianity Today*, February 27, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/february/preaching-christ-from-old-testament-jesus-in-every-scriptur.html>.

44. Recall that application in expository preaching must answer four questions: what, where, why, and how (see my *Christ-Centered Preaching*, chap. 8); Keller, *Preaching*, 118–20; J. Kim, *Preaching the Whole Counsel of God*, 169.

all your mind” (Matt. 22:37 ESV). The foundation of all obedience is a heart for God (Prov. 4:23). We live to honor him because we love him; we draw near to him because we delight to walk with him. Serving our Lord without love for him, or with any other love exceeding love for him, dishonors God no matter how “good” our behaviors are in technical conformity to biblical standards or in comparison to others’ activities. Unless love for God compels our service, our obedience does not glorify him.

The source of our love is God’s love for us (1 John 4:19). This is why the grace of Scripture that culminates in the ministry of Christ is so central to gospel preaching. Grace threaded through Scripture and lavished on us stimulates the love in us that motivates true obedience to him. Love for God makes our righteousness a gift we offer God in loving devotion for his full provision for our sin (Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:15). Without this appreciative response, obedience cannot maintain its doxological intent and may, in fact, become an improper response to the guilt we feel as a consequence of our sin.

Faithful preaching surfaces guilt to break and drive believers to true repentance. Yet for that repentance to be genuine and fruitful, a person must yearn for and be convinced of the power and magnitude of God’s kindness (Rom. 2:4). That is why the apostle Paul, who identified love as his greatest motivation in ministry (2 Cor. 5:14), urges us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices “in view of God’s mercy” (Rom. 12:1).

Grace defined according to the world—as a license to sin or belittle God’s law—ignores the Bible’s perspective that grace compels the heart renewed by the Spirit to want and to do what God wants (Rom. 8:7–15; Gal. 5:16–17). Grace alone motivates us to deny ourselves and enables us to live for God (Titus 2:11–12). This is because at the most fundamental level of our being we consistently do only what we most love to do. Thus, it is the aim of God to renew the affections of believers so that their hearts will most desire him and his ways. This is as contrary to antinomian preaching as heaven’s blessings are to Satan’s lies. The desires of new creatures in Christ Jesus can only be satisfied by the truths of grace fulfilled in lives of obedience. When preachers nourish these desires with love for God, new affections drive out the desires of the world and thereby



strengthen the will to serve God rightly and well.<sup>45</sup> In addition, when rich apprehension of Christ's love makes the fulfillment of God's will our greatest delight, then his glory becomes our greatest pleasure and compulsion.

#### A LOVE FOR OTHERS LOVED BY GOD

When an appreciation for God's love despite our sin motivates our obedience to him, then the need to establish our righteous standing by comparisons with others dies. Love for God overflows into the desire to please him by caring for others he loves. That is why the second-most-important commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself," is "like" the greatest command (Matt. 22:39). To love God with our whole being necessitates sharing his heart for his people and priorities; not to love them is not to love him (Matt. 25:31–46; Luke 10:27–37; 1 John 3:17; 4:16–21). Pride, indifference, and judgmentalism cannot coexist with this love. Christians associate with and aid the needy precisely because (1) grace assures us that the destitute and undeserving are the objects of Christ's affection, (2) they have precisely the status we did prior to Christ's claim on us, and (3) his claim upon us means that we can "afford" such associations without loss of heaven's esteem. Only Christ-centered preaching produces such fruitful confidence.

Personal resonance with the desires of God lifts the concern of Christians from solely individual interests. The critique that Christ-centered preaching creates egocentric Christians, who are concerned only for the benefits God's grace individually provides for them, is illogical and impossible.<sup>46</sup> If we love Christ above all, then we will love what and whom he loves. He loves all that he has made (Ps. 145:9), his creation and his creatures, including the unlovable, the undeserving, the despised, the destitute, the oppressed, the poor, the orphan, and the widow in distress (James 1:27). Proper emphasis on what the Lord has done for us and desires to be done for others raises the eyes of believers beyond the walls of self to consider (and truly love) the

45. Thomas Chalmers, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection," in *Sermons and Discourses* (New York: Carter, 1846), 2:271.

46. Keller, *Preaching*, 152.

underprivileged, unprotected, and unrepentant for Christ's sake.<sup>47</sup> Christ-centered preaching keeps the individual, corporate, community, and creational priorities of the gospel before God's people.

#### A PROPER LOVE FOR SELF IN CHRIST

The Bible consistently and in many ways motivates believers through their desire to experience the blessings of obedience or to avoid the consequences of sin revealed by a loving God. These rewards and warnings of Scripture would be senseless if God did not intend for us to have some regard for our own well-being. This self-regard is both proper and purposeful in gospel-rich preaching. If we are precious enough to God for him to provide his Son to purchase us from eternal death, then it cannot be evil to consider ourselves precious. We are the children of God, coheirs with Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the citizens of heaven, brothers and sisters of Jesus, robed in his righteousness, and will rule with him in glory. If God loves us this much, then it must be proper to love ourselves as well.

Biblical self-love is actually the antidote to morbid Christianity—the sick versions of religion that measure devotion by constant feelings of guilt, expressions of self-hatred, and unrelenting tears of shame. When the gospel ceases to be good news, it is not the gospel. When it ceases to bring joy into our lives, it ceases to be of God. That joy is also the medicine needed for much that ails a generation sickened by the cultural air we breathe. In an age when our common pastoral issues are the products of self-hatred or situational despair (cutting, anorexia, suicide, risky behavior, body sculpting, body revealing, chemical abuse, spousal abuse, internet escapism, etc.), we should not hesitate to urge all God's children to love themselves because Jesus loves them. Self-love is not unbiblical when it serves Christ's priorities and does not supersede love for him. Self-love only damages us when it is served without regard for Christ, or as though it is more important than Christ.

This instruction does not mean that grace should deter us from mentioning sin's biblical consequences. Instead, we should present

47. Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Journey toward Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 83, 111.

biblical identification of sin's consequences as the gracious revelation of a loving Father who wishes for us neither to experience the consequences of our rebellion nor to face the discipline he must dispense in order to turn us from even more serious harm. As previously mentioned, if God did not love, he would not warn.

### *Enablement*

Why must we keep returning to grace-prompted love in faithful exposition of Scripture? Is it not enough to show that God has enabled us to understand and do what he requires (1 Cor. 2:12; Phil. 4:13)? Faith that we are new creatures in Christ Jesus should provide us with the confidence that we can do what God requires by relying on the power his Spirit has instilled within us (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). In addition, the practices and disciplines of the Christian life that confirm and build this faith are powerful means by which God instructs and blesses our lives. But something is still lacking in our messages if we have only proclaimed duties and doctrines that will increase people's competence and performance.

The missing ingredient becomes apparent if we will dare to consider this distasteful question: Since we are no longer slaves to sin, why do we sin? Already we have discovered that the Bible will not allow us to say, "I just can't help it." The grace of God has freed us from the guilt and power of sin. The apostle Paul clearly says, "Sin will have no dominion over you" (Rom. 6:14 ESV). John echoes, "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4 ESV). So why do we sin? The answer we hate is: Because we love it.

If sin did not attract us, it would have absolutely no power in our lives. The reason that we yield to temptation is that we love the sin. That's why James reminds us, "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (James 1:14 ESV). The ultimate source of our transgressions is always that "people loved the darkness rather than the light" (John 3:19 ESV). Sensitive hearts may immediately object, "That cannot be true because I love Jesus." Such love may very well be true, but the reason for our sin is that, in the moment of trial or temptation, we loved the sin more. We loved the passion, the rage, the idol, the entertainment, the person, the

reputation, the reward, the satisfaction, and so on more than the Savior. Love for the sin is what kept us from employing the power we actually possessed to resist it.

So, if our love for sin is what gives it power in our lives, how do we displace love for sin? The plain answer is: with a greater love. The gospel answer is: with a surpassing love for Christ (Eph. 3:16–20; Col. 1:18). That is why love for God is Christ’s greatest commandment, the foundation of all the rest (Matt. 22:37–39), and the means by which God presents himself to us (1 John 4:8). When we love our Lord above all other loves, zeal for him exceeds all other passions. This is why we must proclaim grace so consistently and passionately.<sup>48</sup> This is why God threads his gospel through the totality of Scripture. Grace is not some sentimental, schmaltzy substitute for bold exposition; grace is the stimulus of love that is the gospel’s greatest power. Overwhelming love based on an understanding of the sufficiency, efficacy, and majesty of his grace makes us willing and able to obey God.

### *Transformation*

Preaching that stimulates ever greater love for God drives the affections of the world from the heart so that it beats ever stronger for God’s purposes. This is how Scripture always motivates and empowers obedience. Even Moses preceded the Ten Commandments with a recounting of God’s deliverance, not only so that the Israelites would not believe that their salvation had been by their hands but also so that their hearts would turn toward God.<sup>49</sup> Provision of divine redemption in the face of spiritual need is the consistent message of Scripture and the chief means by which human hearts flood with love for God that is power to obey his commands. Awareness of the power of proclaiming the goodness of God not only helps govern the priorities of preaching but also brings the joy to preaching that will make it a sustaining privilege for a lifetime of ministry.

48. Capill, *The Heart Is the Target*, 226–28.

49. Howell, “How to Preach Christ from the Old Testament,” 9; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 32–37.

No precise formula should govern how preachers maintain a Christ-centered perspective when applying biblical truth.<sup>50</sup> However, when people walk away from a message understanding that grace both motivates and enables them to serve God, futile human striving and vain self-vaunting vanish. Transformed lives result.

As a consequence, preachers should make God's redemptive work integral to the content, the motive, and the power behind all biblical exposition.<sup>51</sup> The goal of such Christ-centered preaching is not some novel interpretation. The goal is to encourage preachers to see and proclaim the relationship God establishes with his people so that they may glorify and enjoy him forever. Preaching the grace of all Scripture that culminates in Christ's ministry turns God's people away from themselves as the providers of their present healing and eternal hope. This is the bottom line of Christ-centered preaching: When a sermon is done, do people look to themselves or to a redeeming God for their security? Only when they know to look to God alone has a sermon been truly beneficial and biblical.

50. Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 264–67, 294–304.

51. Merida, *Christ-Centered Expositor*, 75–77.