

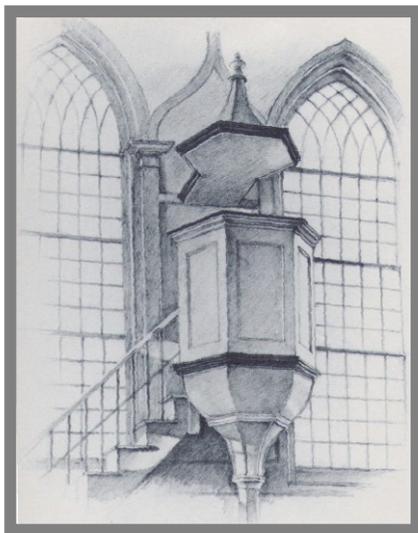
## **Christ-centred Preaching: some reflections on an important issue<sup>1</sup>**

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Luther had this saying which the Puritans loved to cite: that the person who could distinguish between law and grace could thank God and know himself to be a Christian. Which leads me to suggest that the person who can rightly preach Christ from the Scripture can know himself to be a preacher.

Preaching Christ from the Scriptures would seem to be a self-evident issue. When the risen Jesus walked with his disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke tells us, “beginning with Moses and all the



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<sup>1</sup> A modified form of this address was given at Westminster Seminary in California on the occasion of their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, January, 2005.

prophets, he [i.e., Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Lk 24:27). This passage has become something of an interpretive crux in homiletical and hermeneutical discussions of late. When Jesus expounds the Bible, He says that it is all about Him (cf. Jn 5:39, 46). The apostles say the same (Jn 1:45; Acts 10:43; Rom 3:21). Thus, it is argued, if we interpret any portion without relating it to Him, we fail to say the very thing that He and His apostles say it is about. Paul seemed to mimic the concern when writing to the Corinthians, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

A plethora of books has emerged over the last decade giving testimony to the hermeneutical and homiletical concerns of Christ-centred preaching. Among them are two books by Edmund Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* [1991] and *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* [2003]. Both are two of the most valuable contributions to the issue of Christ-centred preaching. Additionally, there is the highly praised volume by Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* [1994, another edition is due in March, 2005].

To this should be added two further volumes, one from Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* [2000], and another by Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* [1999]. Mention ought also be made of Sidney Greidanus’ two other volumes, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* and *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* [2001 (1970)], both of which add significant insights into some of the theological and genre-sensitive issues governing biblically-sound preaching.<sup>2</sup>

In reformed circles, the whole issue of redemptive-historical preaching has become a matter of importance, some of whose devotees

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<sup>2</sup> See also Sidney Greidanus, “The Necessity of Preaching Christ from the Old Testament” in *Preaching* 15 (May-June 2000): 6, 20-27; “The Necessity of Preaching Christ also from Old Testament Texts,” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 34 (April 1999):1, 188-197; “Preaching Christ from the Old Testament,” a four-part series “Preaching Christ from the Genesis Narratives” delivered as the W. H. Griffith Thomas Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, February 18-21, 2003, in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Part 1: “Preaching Christ from the Old Testament” 161 (January-March 2004), 3-13; Part 2: “Preaching Christ from the Creation Narrative” 161 (April-June 2004), 131-141; Part 3: “Preaching Christ from the Narrative of the Fall” 161 (July-September 2004), 259-273; Part 4: “Preaching Christ from the Cain and Abel Narrative” 161 (October-December 2004), 387-397.

have advocated methodologies of preaching at odds with past reformed traditions.<sup>3</sup>

Even from this admittedly narrow (reformed) focus, the trend toward more Christ-centred messages in expository preaching certainly seems to be upon us. Over the last decade, and especially in the last five years, the trickle of materials advocating the necessity of a redemptive theological interpretation of Scripture has become a torrent.<sup>4</sup>

### Identifying the Issue(s)

There are several issues that rise to the surface in the debate over Christ-centred preaching, some of which are related to wider hermeneutical concerns rather than merely preaching methodology. As a starting point, and one that is outside the scope of our concerns here, is the place of preaching itself (whether it be Christ-centred or not). It is difficult to engage in a debate about the hermeneutic employed in preaching the Bible when preaching itself is given such minimalist attention. What is the place of preaching in the plan of God for the

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<sup>3</sup> The *Kerux* magazine, for example, and the writings of James Dennison. See the particularly acidic review of Bryan Chapell's book by Gary Findley in *Kerux* 11 (May 1996), 37-41. Findley contrasts Chapell and Greidanus with Vos, arguing that the latter's two-world cosmology better suits a hermeneutic of Christ-centred preaching.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the works cited, and confining ourselves to works from a reformed perspective, we could mention, Iain M. Duguid, *Hero of Heroes: Seeing Christ in the Beatitudes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001) and *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1999); Raymond Dillard, *Faith in the Face of Apostasy: The Gospel according to Elijah and Elisha* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1999); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1994); Dennis F. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the history of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997); Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1999) and *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991); C. Trimp, *Preaching and the History of Salvation: Continuing an Unfinished Discussion*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Scarsdale, NY: Westminster Discount Book Service, 1996); Gerard Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990); Michael J. Williams, *The Prophet and His Message: Reading Old Testament Prophecy Today* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003).

Church and its existence and growth and maturity? In an age of increasing skepticism about oral monological communication, what place does traditional preaching have when it is viewed as so much opinionated indoctrination at best and tyrannical sectarianism at worst? Does J. I. Packer's definition of preaching still carry weight in our post-modern, visual age?

An applicatory declaration, spoken in God's name and for his praise, in which some part of the written Word of God delivers through the preacher some part of its message about God and godliness in relation to those whom the preacher addresses.<sup>5</sup>

This is a valid question but one that can be left for another occasion. Assuming the timeless validity of preaching as the means by which God's Word is made known, what are the essential features of a method of Christ-centred preaching that give cause for concern in today's (reformed) church and seminary? Three seem to be especially prominent.

- i. The hermeneutic of preaching Christ as *the centre* of the biblical message, and of the Scriptures as a whole. This is more complicated than it appears, particularly for evangelicals for whom the phrase "Christ-centred" rings true for many reasons, not least the Reformational slogan *solo Christo*. Does the Bible have a central-theme and if so, what is it? That this theme is *Christ* seems to be correct, even if more nuanced answers seem to be needed in order to make it more accurate.
- ii. Attention needs to be given to what is meant by preaching Christ *from the Old Testament* in particular. Some fairly

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<sup>5</sup> J.I. Packer, *Truth and Power: The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1996), 123. One may recognize allusions to both Philips Brooks (truth through personality) and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (logic on fire) in this definition. Packer introduces this definition by saying, "Sermons can be looked at from various angles and defined in a number of ways. An institutional definition of a sermon would describe it as a hortatory monologue delivered from a pulpit to people in pews as part of a liturgical program. A sociological definition would highlight the expectations that sermons seek to fulfill and the responsibilities that they are thought to impose. A homiletical definition would view the sermon as didactic communication, put over by means of a special rhetorical technique." 122

weighty theological and historical issues rise to the surface, not least what one reformed historian has labeled, “The Marcions Have Landed!”<sup>6</sup> There are testamentary (dispensational-covenantal) issues involved that are particularly crucial and have historically divided the Christian Church. Of particular exegetical concern is the question: Is *every text* of the Old Testament to be viewed through the grid of Christ and His redemptive work? This becomes all the more crucial given the strongly worded pronouncements of recent authors on this subject:

“...all texts in the whole Bible bear a discernible relationship to Christ and are primarily intended as a testimony to Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

“In its context, every passage possesses one or more of four redemptive foci. Every text is predictive of the work of Christ, preparatory for the work of Christ, reflective of the work of Christ, and/or resultant of the work of Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

“The unity of redemptive history implies the *Christocentric* nature of every historical text. Redemptive history is the

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<sup>6</sup> Carl Trueman, *The Wages of Sin* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications [Mentor], 2005), 165-168. Marcion (c.85-c.160 A.D.) employed a radical treatment of removing all traces of Judaism from the New Testament.

<sup>7</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 113. Cf. Dan Doriani: “the entire Bible speaks of him, then every Christian lesson should in its own way, present Jesus as Redeemer and Lord.” *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Whole Bible: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1996), 174.

<sup>8</sup> Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 275. Bryan Chappell insists that this is *not* what he is attempting in his *Christ-Centered Preaching*: “When I use the word ‘Christ-centered’ or the phrase ‘Christ-centered preaching,’ I am not attempting to say that Jesus has to be shown to be present in every biblical text. Sometimes people hear the words ‘Christ-centered preaching’ and they are preaching a passage where Israel is wandering in the wilderness and they say, ‘Now where is Jesus? Is He behind that bush or is He in that camel track? I don’t see Him.’” In, “What is Expository Preaching? An Interview with Bryan Chappell,” in *Preaching* 16 (March-April 2001), 7. Chappell goes on to say that he is happy with using the term “redemptive-preaching” as a synonym for “Christ-centered preaching.” See also Chappell’s “The Future of Expository Preaching,” in *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review* 30 (Fall 2004), 2:65-80.

history of Christ. He stands at its center, but no less at its beginning and end...<sup>9</sup>

“...every message from the Old Testament must be seen in the light of Jesus Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

- iii. Does the hermeneutic of Christ-centered preaching necessarily invalidate “biographical preaching”? Whether explicit or otherwise, a growing concern over the validity of biographical (moralistic) preaching has gained credence in reformed homiletical literature, almost to the extent that historical texts are no longer to be viewed as having a narrative grounding of its own. In the interests of the wider redemptive-historical meta-narrative, the story itself seems to be un-earthed.

Wider attention now needs to be given to all three of these issues.

### **Preaching Christ as the Central Motif of Scripture**

Is there a unifying principle of theology/Scripture? The issue is of greater interest than at first appears. After all, various responses to this question have been given even within the narrower focus of reformed theology. Thus, covenant, law-gospel, kingdom, and eschatology have been suggested as playing “central” roles in the theology of the Bible, and each with some considerable justification.

Within Reformed theology, from Herman Witsius (1636-1708) onwards and possibly before him, the idea of covenant as engaging the unifying theme of theology has gained wide acceptability. Covenant thus is a way of reading the Bible that is itself part of the overall

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<sup>9</sup> G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), 5-7.

<sup>10</sup> S. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 51. Several reviewers of these works have pointed out that a concession to the hermeneutic of preaching Christ from the Old Testament ought not necessarily imply preaching Christ from every *text* of the Old Testament. Thus Todd Murphy, reviewing Greidanus, can say, “Greidanus is not absolutely clear, but it does seem that he is saying “every text” must somehow be a witness to Christ. Thus, his seven methods could theoretically be turned into a more sophisticated grab-bag of homiletical tools to *make* every text “witness to Christ.” This begins to show itself in the suggestion that one must preach wisdom literature “redemptive-historically” in spite of the common consensus that Israel’s wisdom traditions are rooted rather in a theology of creation.” See, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 44 (June 2001), 2: 331.

interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds. As such, Bible readers discern:

- that God is revealing in Scripture His work of creation, providence and grace, works carried out by a God who exists in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- What Bible readers note is the triune God's determination to raise fallen man from ruin and certain perdition to share in Christ's glory.
- They discern that this has both redemptive-historical aspects as the plan unfolds through a complicated history in which, as in a good novel, the *dénouement* is only resolved gradually and climactically in birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension complex of Jesus Christ.
- God takes fallen creatures and re-makes them, an act that is both judicial in its justification and transformational in its sanctification and glorification.

Nowhere is this more distinctly summarized than in the Westminster Confession: "The distance between man and God is so great that although reasonable creatures owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant." (7:i). *Exactly!*

This is the bigger picture without which such things as: the plan of salvation, faith, the church and its sacraments, worship *let alone Jesus Christ as prophet, priest and king*, make no sense at all. They each appear as so many disparate elements without any linkage. Covenant – that bond which God establishes between Himself and His people, the mediator of which is Jesus Christ (Larger Catechism, Q. 36).

Scripture, therefore, is not understood unless viewed covenantally. This hermeneutical device ensures that we view the larger picture within the smaller one, that wherever we may be historically in the narrative of redemption, there is one goal, one purpose, one mind at work providentially ordering all things toward a decisive goal. Hence the whole Bible revolves around a twin-covenantal theme: man created then ruined; man redeemed, then glorified. A covenant of works/covenant of grace is how historically this has been viewed. The failure of the covenant of works provided God with an opportunity to reveal in embryo the solution – the Seed of the woman crushing the head of Satan, whilst the devil manages only to bruise the Mediator's heel (Gen 3:15). This *proto-evangelium* is embryonic of the gospel in

its victorious character (*Christus Victor*). Each book of the Bible, as well as the history that underlies it, makes sense only as this covenant of grace is seen to be unfolding, first along specific (though not altogether confined) theocratic (Jewish) lines within Abraham's seed, the nation of Israel, then bursting into cosmic (trans-national) lines at Pentecost. True, something decisive takes place at Pentecost, but it is not something that was not anticipated and even foreshadowed in pre-Pentecost Old Testament times. Thus what emerges is an unfolding drama in which:

- i. There is one mediator of the covenant, the Messiah (Christ), first typified in terms of three offices (*munus triplex*): prophet, priest and king.
- ii. There is one people of God, the covenant community, the church (the "Israel of God" Gal. 6:16). Thus a line is drawn from Abel through Noah and Abraham to the world-wide church of God today which confesses the name of Christ.
- iii. There is one pattern of covenant piety (about which more needs to be said in a minute). Covenant purpose and covenant life are thus linear from Genesis to Revelation, from Eden to Eternity.

Covenant theology thus ensures that nothing that God does is viewed *apart* from Christ as the covenant Mediator. To cite Geerhardus Vos, "For the Reformed, therefore, the entire *ordo salutis*, beginning with regeneration as its first stage, is bound to the mystical union with Christ. There is no gift that is not bestowed by him and that does not elevate God's glory through his bestowal."<sup>11</sup>

It is only as Christ is viewed within the overarching theme of covenant that we can ensure a faithful preaching of Christ that is true to Scripture. Thus viewed, the meaning of "Christ-centredness" takes on a somewhat wider shape, encompassing a Trinitarian understanding of the Being and Work of God in which it is possible (even accurate) to suggest that Christ is "at the centre." Without such a focus, the

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<sup>11</sup> *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin (Philadelphia: P & R, 1980), 248. This is true despite Vos' over-emphasis on the eschatological aspect of union with Christ. By stressing too little the existential aspect whereby we are brought into union with Christ, a tendency to presumptive regeneration often follows.

temptation arises to view Christ too narrowly, at worst in some *Christomonistic* fashion.

### **Preaching Christ from the Old Testament**

Is the Old Testament sub-Christian (as Marcion, Harnack, Schleiermacher and Bultmann have argued)? Or is it simply pre-Christian (as James Barr has argued)?

Jay Adams once wrote, “If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the member of a Jewish synagogue or to a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it.”<sup>12</sup>

The problem of the blank page between the Testaments is one of the greatest issues in theology. Few have summarized the issue of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments as well as Calvin in his *Institutes* (Book 2). If the page was torn out, few would have difficulty in reinserting it – the coming of Christ seems to be overwhelmingly transitional. Thus Alec Motyer describes the Old Testament as “the Book with the answers in the back.”<sup>13</sup> Like a detective novel where the riddle awaits the *dénouement*, the “coming together,” in the closing pages, the New Testament seems to be built on the Old, the Old seems to expect the New. But this does not make interpreting the Old Testament necessarily easier. The concern for rooting texts in their historical context can often cloud larger tracts of meaning poured into them by the light of the New Testament. The Psalm citations in Hebrews, for example, seem to be interpreted in a way that goes far beyond what the original writers would necessarily have seen. Their Christological fulfillment seems self-evident given their new interpretation; but coming to these Psalms “cold” would probably not yield such interpretations. The Old seems to beg for the

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<sup>12</sup> Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982), 147.

<sup>13</sup> Alec Motyer, *Look to the Rock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 19. Kuyper: *protasis-apodosis* structure of a sentence (OT is the “if” and the NT is the “then it follows that”). Augustine famously viewed the Old Testament as a room full of furniture with the lights dimmed. Calvin’s favourite metaphor was taken from Hebrews 10:1, viewing the Old Testament as a “sketch.” Calvin is nodding to Chrysostom. See Chrysostom, *Sermons in the Epistle to the Philippians*, no. 10, MPG 62:257, cited in Leslie W. Barnard, *Studia Theologica* 36 (1982):2: “Similarly in painting: an artist sketches a king, but until the colours are applied he is not called a king; and when they are put on the type is hidden by the truth and is not visible; and then we say ‘Behold the King!’” Other New Testament pictures include, Copy (spodeigma) John 13:15; shadow (skia) (Heb 8:5); pattern (tupoō) (Heb 8:5)

light of the New in order for them to be understood. “Mere” historical grounding will not yield all their nectar.

On the issue of preaching Christ from the Old Testament, some strongly worded pronouncements have been made concerning even the greatest of exegetes. Sidney Greidanus, for example, takes Calvin to task at this point. “Calvin did not sufficiently focus on producing explicitly Christ-centered sermons in the context of the whole Scripture” and as such, provides “an inadequate model for preaching in our post-Christian culture.”<sup>14</sup>

According to David Puckett, in a recent analysis of Calvin’s exegetical method and hermeneutic governing his use of the Old

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<sup>14</sup> Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 149. Greidanus identifies his own method as falling “somewhere between Calvin’s theocentric method and Luther’s Christological method.” 227. In 1595, some three decades after Calvin’s death, the Lutheran Aegidius Hunnius made the (similar) charge: that Calvin was no better than a “Judaizer” in his understanding of the Old Testament. Aegidius Hunnius, *Calvinus Iudaizans, Hoc est: Iudaicae Glossae et Corruptilae, Quibus Iohannes Calvinus illustrissima Scripturae sacrae loca & Testimonia, de gloriosa Trinitate, Deitate Christi, & spiritus sancti, eum primis autem vaticinia Prophetarum de Adventu Messiae, nativitate eius, passione, resurrectione, ascensione in coelos & sessione ad dextram Dei, detestandum in modum corrumpere non exhorruit. Addita est corruptelarum confutatio.* (Wittenberg, 1595). Aegidius Hunnius (1550-1603) studied theology under Jakob Andreae, Jacob Heerbrand, Johannes Brenz, and Erhard Schnepf at Tübingen (1565-1574), later taught at Marburg (1576-1592), and later still at the University of Wittenberg. See entry by William R. Russell in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, vol. 2 (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 276.

Jerome Friedman suggests that Calvin would not have been surprised by this charge since the term Judaizer was a frequent epithet of the times by all sides. “The Lutheran author Hunnius described John Calvin as a judaizer much as Calvin believed Lutheran liturgy was highly judaistic. On the other hand, Roman Catholic spokesmen thought Lutheran preoccupation with scriptural literalism was judaistic while both Reformed and Lutheran thinkers assumed Roman Catholic interest in ceremony and ritual reflected judaizing tendencies. Expressing a rare ecumenism, all agreed that Michael Servetus was a severe judaizer by any and all standards. For his part, Servetus lamented his being persecuted by judaizing Christians, Calvin in particular.” Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the age of Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1983), 182. On Calvin’s view of Lutheran liturgy, see his letter to Guillaume Farel, April 1539. [CO 10:340]. See also, David Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 1-18.

Testament, all of this shows that “ambiguity and tension existed throughout the Christian era concerning the role of the Old Testament in the life and thought of the church.”<sup>15</sup> Puckett’s conclusion, following an exhaustive study of Calvin’s Old Testament commentaries, is one that Ford Lewis Battles has also voiced: that Calvin attempted to find a middle way between the opposing extremes of Jewish interpretation on the one hand, and Lutheran, Christo-centric interpretations on the other, finding himself “on the Christian end of any Jewish-Christian exegetical continuum.”<sup>16</sup> Puckett reaches this conclusion from examining the commentaries alone. However, it may be argued that the desire to reach Christological conclusions is heightened in preaching, which requires careful exegetical work to be applied in a way that a commentary does not.

A crucial question that needs to be addressed in this issue can be put this way: the entire Old Testament bears witness to Christ but does the Old Testament bear witness *only* to Christ? True, Luke 27:44 refers to things written “in the prophets and law of Moses,” not necessarily implying that *every text speaks that way*. It is interesting to note that Sidney Greidanus seems to have changed his mind on this issue over the past quarter-century. In *Sola Scriptura* (written in the 1970’s) he spoke of “God-centered” preaching, rather than Christ-centred preaching,<sup>17</sup> but in *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* he speaks of “Christ-centered preaching”.<sup>18</sup>

### **Preaching Christ As Both Saviour (Who Justifies Us) and Lord (Who Sanctifies Us)**

A particular issue that has gained notoriety in reformed expository preaching is Brian Chapell’s so-called, “Fallen Condition Focus” (FCF). The entirety of the narrative of Scripture is to be seen in relation to Genesis 3:15, the *protoevangelium*. To suggest that any text of Scripture can be fulfilled apart from a consideration of the text’s

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<sup>15</sup> Puckett, *Calvin’s Exegesis*, 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Puckett, *Calvin’s Exegesis*, 140. See also, Ford Lewis Battles, *Calculus Fidei: Some Ruminations on the Structure of the Theology of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1978). For an analysis of Christological interpretations prior to Calvin, see James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969).

<sup>17</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge, 1970), 145.

<sup>18</sup> Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 36-37.

relationship to justification by faith and man's moral inability to do anything meritorious is to promote Pharisaism. It is to preach moralism – inadvertently conveying the notion of acceptance by good works performed on our part and by our own efforts. It is to draw attention to ourselves and away from the saving work of Christ. Thus biographical preaching which focuses on individual biblical characters and suggests that we should be like them (or not like them) receives the same opprobrium.<sup>19</sup>

The problem with the FCF principle is that it, too, tends to focus on man and human need. It is a hermeneutic that focuses on justification, and in some circles on definitive sanctification, at the expense of *progressive* sanctification. It suggests that there is no category of “ought,” or *moral imperative*, that has validity in a reformed hermeneutic of Scriptural ethical interpretation. This is a bigger issue than can be outlined here, but it remains stubbornly at the centre of much preaching, leading, in some at least, to what appears to be an antinomian strain. Ethics becomes merely reflecting on what we are by grace (the so-called moral indicative) without regard for the consequent *demand* (the so-called moral imperative).

At root is the age-old issue of the understanding of the relation of law and gospel, of the relationship of justification to sanctification, and especially of what Calvin called the *third-use* of the law. The problem with viewing every text of Scripture from the point of view of the Fallen Condition Focus (the paranoia that unless we do this we produce Pharisees) fails to see the indicative-imperative axis of Pauline ethics. Thus biblical ethics has no fear of the imperative (“Do this” not because it assumes “Do this and live” but because it models “Do this because of who you are”).<sup>20</sup> Biblical ethics has to do with expressing

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<sup>19</sup> See, Brian Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, passim.

<sup>20</sup> Todd Murphy points out Greidanus' aversion to ethical content in preaching in his *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*. “In various places throughout, he makes strong comments about “ethical preaching” and “moralism.” We certainly agree that preaching is far more than ethics and that moralistic preaching is an easy tap for the common preacher. However, Greidanus himself seems somewhat averse to granting OT narrative much of a moral voice in spite of the strong moral bent in so much Hebrew narrative.” Murphy's review in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 44 (June 2001), 2: 331. Another reviewer notes that where Greidanus “does judge application as appropriate, he seems to prefer corporate, rather than personal, examples.” (H. David Shuringa, *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (April 2001):1, 213-14). Interestingly, Greidanus chides Chapell, in a review of the latter's *Christ-Centered Preaching* for his insistence that “a truth without an

God's covenantal relationship to us in covenantal relationships between ourselves and others, animated by the gratitude which is the reflex of those who have tasted grace.<sup>21</sup>

The propriety of preaching biblical characters and the charge that doing so necessarily implies moralistic preaching is one of immense significance, not only because it questions the practice of the (reformed) church of past and present, but also because it radically changes the way we understand the nature of the Bible – particularly its historical sections.<sup>22</sup> As those charged, like Paul, to declare “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26-27) – a focus on what God has done as well as what God requires – preachers *must* relate their messages to Christ. Christ's mediation, His cross and resurrection especially, will not only inform us of what Christ has done for us, it will also (Paul-like) inform us of what the cross-resurrection axis *demand*s. Preachers

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apparent application falls short of the requirements of formal propositions” (Chapell, 141, 142, 143, 144). See Sidney Greidanus' review of Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching* in *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995), 282-285. The Redemptive-Historical Focus (RHF), on the other hand, focuses on something bigger: the unfolding of God's saving plan in space and time. This is an improvement. It draws attention to the work of God in history. It is less anthropological in its focus than the FCF principle. But it, too, assumes that everything in Scripture has a *redemptive* focus. Is no part of Scripture reflective of a distinction between general and special revelation? Is no regard to be given to what Calvin, in his outline of the *Institutes*, distinguishes as the revelation of God *the Creator* and the revelation of God *the Redeemer*? What place is there for the sermons of Acts 14 and 17, for example, in which the thrust of the message is general revelation?

<sup>21</sup> Interesting observation of the role of the Reading of the Law in Calvin's Strasbourg and Genevan liturgies of 1543 and 1545. It comes after (not before) the confession of sin and absolution. It functions as Calvin's understanding of the third use of the law (*tertius usus legis*).

<sup>22</sup> See also Sidney Greidanus, “The Necessity of Preaching Christ also from Old Testament Texts,” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 34 (April 1999):1, 188-197. “A common way of preaching the Old Testament is biographical or character preaching, which focuses on the biblical characters and presents them as examples of what to do or what not to do. This human-centered, character-imitation preaching rarely gets to God's revelation of himself, let alone God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. A second, and far better, way of preaching the Old Testament focuses on God and his redemptive acts. Unfortunately, this God-centered preaching frequently fails to make the connection with God's ultimate revelation of himself in Jesus Christ..” 188. Greidanus goes to suggest that one of the reasons for this lack of Christ-centredness is the concern for ecumenicity with other “faiths.” 189.

will insist on a resolution not to know anything “except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). That does not mean that preachers will harp all the time on the bare facts of the crucifixion. But it will mean that they will draw all the lines that lead to Calvary and beyond it, to glory.

Such Trinitarian-centred, Christ-focused, redemptive-historically sensitive preaching will both inform us of what God has accomplished on our behalf as well as drive us to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling,” imitating the godly *in as far as they are reflective of Jesus-likeness*, and avoiding the ungodly aspects of even the best of God’s saints, seeing these as blemishes unfit for Christ’s kingdom.