

PREACHING THE FOREST AND THE TREES: INTEGRATING BIBLICAL THEOLOGY WITH EXPOSITORY PREACHING

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INTRODUCTION

Evangelicals through the years have emphasized the need for Christian preachers to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. The sixteenth-century Puritan William Perkins summarized his theory saying, “Preach one Christ, by Christ, to the praise of Christ. To God alone be the glory.”¹ Likewise, John Broadus summarized his approach saying, “The subject of preaching is divine truth, centrally the gospel as revealed and offered in Jesus Christ.”²

While many would say “amen!” to these affirmations on the importance of the gospel, others would also want to emphasize the primacy of expository preaching. Essentially, expository preaching attempts to explain and apply the biblical text in its context. This poses an interesting dilemma for Christian preachers. Bryan Chapell, President of Covenant Theological Seminary and preaching professor, has raised the question precisely asking, “How do I preach the text that is present *and* preach Christ where he may not seem to be present?”³ In asking this question, two assumptions are being made: (1) expositors should be faithful to the context of a passage, and (2) Christian preachers should desire to proclaim the glories of Christ.

¹William Perkins, *The Art of Prophecy*, rev. Sinclair Ferguson, first published in Latin in 1592 and in English 1606, (reprint, Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 79.

²John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, new and rev. ed. Jesse Witherspoon, 6. C. H. Dodd provides a summary of several elements of Paul’s kerygma: (1) Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled and the new age was inaugurated by the coming of Christ, (2) he was born of the seed of David, (3) he died according to the Scriptures to deliver mankind out of this present evil age, (4) he was buried, (5) he rose on the third day according to the Scriptures, (6) he is now exalted at the right hand of God as the Son of God and Lord of the living and dead, and (7) he will come again as the Judge and Savior of humanity. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 17.

³Bryan Chapell, “Christ-Centered Heart,” William E. Conger Jr. Lectures on Biblical Preaching at Beeson Divinity School, February 26, 2002, cassette.

How does one deal with the text with integrity and preach Christ from a text like Nehemiah? After all, many Old Testament instructors declare that “you should not look for Jesus under every rock!” Students are taught to respect and consider the “original” hearers. Thus, the question remains as to whether the preacher can accomplish these two goals (exposition and Christ-centeredness) without arbitrarily inserting Jesus into the text or simply “leapfrogging to Jesus” at the end of the sermon.

Chapell argues that one of the solutions to this dilemma is for the expositor to see the Bible as a unified book of redemptive history, which culminates in the person and work of Christ. He states,

In a similar sense, preachers cannot properly explain a seed (or portion) of biblical revelation, even if they say many true things about it, unless they relate it to the redeeming work of God that all Scripture ultimately purposes to disclose. In this sense, the entire Bible is Christ-centered because his redemptive work in all of its incarnational, atoning, rising, interceding, and reigning dimensions is the capstone of all of God’s revelation of his dealings with his people. Thus, no aspect of revelation can be thoroughly understood or explained in isolation of Christ’s redeeming work.⁴

Therefore, the goal for Christ-centered expositors is not to “look for Jesus under every rock,” but rather to find out how a particular text fits into the whole redemptive story that culminates in Christ. Contextual analysis -- a topic emphasized in many expository preaching books -- may begin with the book context of the selected passage but it should not end there. Ultimately, the particular book is within the wider biblical context. In other words, it is a short story within the meta-narrative of Scripture.

Chapell provides a helpful analogy to describe this process. He says that preachers should use both a “microscope” and a “theological fish-eye lens”⁵ when examining a text, in order to see the forest (the larger redemptive story) and the trees (the immediate text and its details). It seems that expositional theory often focuses upon the trees to the neglect of the forest, missing an important dimension of the text and a degree of its glory and grace. Good exposition will expose the trees and the forest, giving respect for the original author and respect for the redemptive story and its hero: Jesus.

The discipline that deals with the unfolding of God’s redemptive work in history is often called biblical theology. The purpose of this article is discuss the need to integrate biblical theology with expository preaching in order for the preacher to be both faithful to the selected text and the task of proclaiming Christ as the hero of redemptive history. However, this brief report is but the tip of the iceberg. The goal here is mainly to expose various voices on this issue. The burden is to make a good thing (expository preaching) better.

⁴Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 276.

⁵*Ibid.*, 275.

To make a case for the marriage of these two disciplines, the centrality of the Bible in expository preaching will first be discussed. Next, the centrality of Christ in the Bible will be considered. Finally, the subsequent need for integrating biblical theology with exposition will be proposed. In the end, some concluding thoughts about the practical benefits of Christ-centered exposition will be offered.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE BIBLE IN EXPOSITORY PREACHING

While there are many nuances to one's definition of expository preaching, the common agreement seems to be that expository preaching is governed by the text of Scripture. John Broadus provided a general definition: "An expository discourse may be defined as one which is occupied mainly, or at any rate very largely, with the exposition of Scripture."⁶

Chapell simply maintains that expository preaching "attempts to present and apply the truths of a specific biblical passage."⁷ Similarly, John MacArthur Jr. argues that expository preaching involves "presenting a passage entirely and exactly as God intended."⁸ Sidney Greidanus states that exposition describes what is involved in biblical preaching, i.e., the exposition of a biblical passage (or passages).⁹ John Piper asserts, "All Christian preaching should be the exposition and application of biblical texts. Our authority as preachers sent by God rises and falls with our manifest allegiance to the text of Scripture."¹⁰ Thus, the explanation of a passage (or passages) of Scripture is central to each of these writers.

Moreover, F. B. Meyer, Harold Bryson, and Andrew Blackwood are representative homileticians who articulate expository preaching in terms of sermon *form*. For these

⁶John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, new and rev. ed. Jesse Witherspoon (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), 144. For other definitions See also: Donald Miller, *The Way to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), 26; Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 29; Merrill Unger, *Principles for Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 1955; John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 125-126. Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 21.

⁷Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 30.

⁸John MacArthur Jr. and The Master's Seminary Faculty, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word, 1982), 23-24.

⁹Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 11.

¹⁰John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 41; In this particular text, Piper adds that expositors should not only explain God's Word but also *exult* over the Word in order to bring pleasure to the hearer and glory to God; *Ibid.*, 55.

authors, expository preaching deals with the *length of the passage* or the *origin of the sermon series*. Blackwood asserts, “Expository preaching means that the light for any sermon comes mainly from a Bible passage longer than two or three consecutive verses.”¹¹ F. B. Meyer offers his view saying, “We are able to define expository preaching as the consecutive treatment of some book or extended portion of Scripture.”¹² Similar to Meyer, Bryson states that expository preaching “involves the art of preaching a series of sermons either consecutively or selectively from a Bible book.”¹³

Therefore, some theorists argue that expository preaching simply involves presenting and applying the truths of a particular biblical passage. Other theorists add that expository preaching involves preaching a specific length of passage or a specific type of sermon series. Both perspectives, however, emphasize the centrality of the Bible in expository preaching. The sermon should be driven by the text of Scripture.

THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST IN THE BIBLE

Understanding the nature of Scripture seems to be an essential requirement for preachers who wish to expound what the biblical text says. Many homileticians assert that the primary emphasis of the Bible is upon redemptive history, which culminates in Christ’s person and work. For example, Arturo Azurdia argues that the Bible is “a record of the redemption of the people of God by His Son, Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ If the Bible focuses upon Christ’s redemptive work, then this should have practical implications for expositors who wish to proclaim the Bible accurately.

Those who wish to challenge the unity of the Bible and its Christocentric emphasis must give an answer to several biblical texts that seem to demonstrate this idea. For example, one should consider the following texts:

- [Jesus said,] “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about *me*” (John 5:39, emphasis added).
- [Jesus said,] “If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of *me*” (John 5:46, emphasis added).
- “And beginning with Moses and *all* the Prophets, he [Jesus] interpreted to them in *all* the Scriptures the things concerning *himself*” (Luke 24:27, emphasis added).

¹¹Andrew Blackwood, *Expository Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, Baker Original Paperback, 1975), 13.

¹²F. B. Meyer, *Expository Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910; reprint, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 25.

¹³Harold T. Bryson, *Expository Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman), 39.

¹⁴Arturo Azurdia, *Spirit Empowered Preaching* (Ross-Shire, England: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), 52.

- “Then he [Jesus] said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was with you while I was still with you, that everything written about *me* in the *Law* of Moses and the *Prophets* and the *Psalms* must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures...” (Luke 24:44-45, emphasis added).

While preachers should not assume unwarranted connections to Jesus, they also should not overlook or ignore what seemed to be very clear—that the Old Testament writers were pointing to the Messiah.

Of course, some authors have observed the centrality of Christ in the Bible. Norman Geisler states, “Christ is presented as the tie between the Testaments, the content of the whole cannon, and the unifying theme within each book of the Bible.”¹⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright says, “The Old Testament tells the story which Jesus completes.”¹⁶ Similarly, Donald Juell posits, “The beginnings of Christian reflection can be traced to the interpretations of Israel’s scriptures, and the major focus of that scriptural interpretation was Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah.”¹⁷ Each of these authors argue that the person and work of Christ is the main message of the Bible.

Recent homileticians have looked to Paul as a model for the necessity of preaching Christ.¹⁸ James Thompson reminds preachers, “Whether Paul refers to the subject of his preaching as *Jesus Christ* or *the gospel*, he is actually referring to the narrative of God’s actions in Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix referred to the early church saying, “Paul, too, centered on Jesus, claiming to the Corinthians that he had ‘determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified’ (1 Cor. 2:2).”²⁰ These evangelicals argue that Christ was the main subject of Paul’s preaching, even though he did address other topics.

THE INTEGRATION OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY WITH EXPOSITION

Even though the need to preach Christ may be an obvious concern for evangelicals, there seems to be a missing element; namely, the need to preach Christ through careful

¹⁵Norman Geisler, *Christ: The Theme of the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 7.

¹⁶Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 2. He adds that students must “look at Jesus in the light of the history of the Old Testament, but also that he sheds light backwards on it.”

¹⁷Donald Juell, *Messianic Exegesis* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 1.

¹⁸See James Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul* (Louisville: Westminster: John Knox Press, 2001).

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 44.

²⁰Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 21.

exposition. According to some authors, such preaching is possible because the Bible is a unified book of redemptive history, and to treat one particular text means that one should consider how the selected text fits into the whole redemptive story. This idea comes from their understanding of biblical theology.

For example, Graeme Goldsworthy, D. A. Carson, and J. I. Packer argue the need for biblical theology in hermeneutics and its subsequent use in expository preaching. Packer defines biblical theology as “the umbrella-name for those disciplines that explore the unity of the Bible, delving into the contents of books, showing the links between them, and pointing up the ongoing flow of the revelatory and redemptive process that reached its climax in Jesus Christ.”²¹ So Packer emphasizes the uniqueness of particular texts but also wants to emphasize the unity of the canon as well.

Similarly, Goldsworthy claims that biblical theology helps understand the redemptive nature of Scripture because it “shows the relationship of all the parts of the Old Testament to the person and work of Jesus Christ and, therefore, to the Christian.”²² He adds, “The Bible is a book about Christ which is inspired by the Holy Spirit. . . . We begin with Jesus Christ, and we see every part of the Bible in relationship to him and his saving work. This is true of the Old Testament as it is of the New.”²³ Goldsworthy states his perspective on the purpose of preaching saying, “It ought to be the aim of every pastor to bring all members of his or her congregation to maturity in Christ. But they cannot mature if they do not know the Christ in the Bible, the Christ to whom the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments, give a unified and inspired testimony.”²⁴ For Goldsworthy, by considering redemptive history, the preacher is able to explain the redemptive focus of each passage (or passages) of Scripture.²⁵

Carson emphasizes how biblical theology focuses on the unity of the Bible and redemptive history, without sacrificing the individual documents and each historical context. He says, “On the one hand, biblical theology will try to preserve one glorious diversity of all the biblical documents; on the other, it will try to uncover all that holds them together,

²¹J. I. Packer, “Forward” in *The Unfolding Mystery* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988), 7-8.

²²Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to the Plan* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 27.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Graeme Goldsworthy, “Biblical Theology as the Heartbeat of Effective Ministry” in *Biblical Theology*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 286.

²⁵Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 30.

sacrificing neither historical particularity nor the unifying sweep of redemptive history.”²⁶ The implication for preaching, then, is for the expositor to look at the immediate context as well as the canonical context. Carson calls the process of explaining the whole Bible “inner-canonical preaching.” He states, “At its best, expository preaching is preaching which however dependent it may be for its content, upon text(s) at hand, draws attention to inner-canonical connections (connections within Scripture) that inexorably moves to Jesus Christ.”²⁷ For Carson, Christ-centered preaching happens by relating the biblical-theological connections within Scripture.

Others have also articulated the need for expounding the larger redemptive context of the Bible when doing exposition. Edmund Clowney argues that by integrating biblical theology, the preacher can always maintain the needed Christ-centered focus, even from the Old Testament. He claims that Christ illustrates this pattern in the Emmaus Road encounter.²⁸ Similarly, Merrill Unger urges preachers to pay attention to the unity of the Bible and its redemptive-historical place in the canon. He states, “Above all he [the preacher] must constantly remind himself that Scripture itself is the source of his theology and that the Bible as a doctrinal source-book is a unity.”²⁹

William D. Thompson argues that if one does not expose the redemptive nature of Scripture, one cannot preach biblically.³⁰ Walter Kaiser also urges preachers to stay true to the original context of the passage, but also to give consideration to the larger context of the Bible as well.³¹

Further, David L. Larsen posits that Christian preachers cannot preach a text in the Old Testament the way would a rabbi. He states that “preaching of any part of Scripture must stand within a clear sense of theological construct, and for the Christian proclaimer

²⁶D. A. Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 100-101.

²⁷D. A. Carson, “The Primacy of Expository Preaching,” Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, 1995, cassette.

²⁸Edmund Clowney, *Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures*,” in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1986), 165.

²⁹Unger, 155.

³⁰William Thompson, *Preaching Biblically* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 74. Thompson posits, “The Bible is a witness to the saving activity of God in Jesus Christ, the meaning of whose life, death, and resurrection controls the meaning of *every* passage.”

³¹Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 140. He calls this process “theological exegesis.”

that construct is Christocentric.”³² Sidney Greidanus refers to the process of preaching God’s acts from the perspective of the New Testament “Christocentric preaching.”³³ He explains, “In other words, Christocentric preaching requires that a passage receive a theocentric interpretation not only in its own (Old Testament) horizon but also in the broader horizon of the whole canon. In this way one can do justice to two sets of biblical testimonies: on the one hand, Christ as the eternal Logos is present and active in Old Testament times, and on the other hand, Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament.”³⁴

At this point, some conclude that these authors are *only* talking about evangelistic preaching, but that is not the case. Thomas Smith qualifies this approach stating that such an idea shows a limited understanding of the gospel, as well as a misunderstanding of ethics. He argues that New Testament writers deal with every ethical requirement, every matter of conduct, as it is rooted in the redemptive work of Christ.³⁵ Jay Adams also claims that ethical and evangelistic preaching must be Christ-centered. He states, “Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach. That is just as true of edificational preaching as it is of evangelistic preaching.”³⁶ For these representatives, the clear division between preaching the gospel to unbelievers and preaching ethics to believers is unwarranted. While it is true that unbelievers need to be confronted with the gospel, believers also need to be reminded of the gospel for perspective and pointed to the gospel for power.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

In light of this argument, the obvious question is about *how* the preacher should structure an expository sermon that integrates biblical theology thereby emphasizing God’s redeeming work in Christ. While few preaching theorists have provided practical help on this matter, Bryan Chapell has offered some useful ideas that can be implemented easily if the preacher will give attention to the text’s position in relation to Christ.

³²David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 163-164.

³³Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and The Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 119.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Thomas N. Smith, “Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing” in *Reforming Pastoral Ministry*, ed. John Armstrong (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 109. Smith states, “We [preachers] must see the indivisibility of theology and conduct and must see each in its vital relationship to Jesus Himself.” For a discussion on the distinction made between the *kerygma* and the *didache*, as presented by C. H. Dodd, in *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, see Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 70. Clowney opposes Dodd’s separation. He admits that a message may be presented differently in certain contexts, but the gospel must always be proclaimed both inside and outside the church -- evangelistically and ethically.

³⁶Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 147.

Chapell states that every text will fall into one of three categories. First, a text may reveal “text disclosure.” This means that a particular text explicitly mentions the redeeming work of God in Christ. Second, a text may reveal “type disclosure.” He defines typology “as it relates to Christ’s person and work is the study of the correspondence between persons, events, and institutions that first appear in the Old Testament and preview, prepare, or more fully express New Testament salvation truths.”³⁷ Third, a text may also reveal “context disclosure.” In this category, Chapell has four sub-categories. He uses the phrase *context disclosure* to refer to the act of disclosing the redemptive focus by pointing out if a text is (1) predictive of the work of Christ, (2) preparatory for the work of Christ, (3) reflective of the work of Christ, and/or (4) resultant of the work of Christ.³⁸ In other words, the expositor may show how every passage is related to God’s redeeming work by identifying where it lies in relation to Christ’s person and work.

While one could list many benefits of integrating biblical theology with expository preaching, only three will be noted. First, by integrating biblical theology with expository preaching, the preacher will be able to faithfully preach the gospel every week, while also maturing the body of Christ. Obviously, the gospel needs to be proclaimed clearly to unbelievers. However, preachers should also remember that the gospel is more than a ticket to heaven. Tim Keller sates, “The gospel is not just the “A-B-C’s of Christianity but is the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we make all progress in the kingdom.”³⁹ This seems to be what Paul is saying in Gal. 2:14, when he reported that Peter’s “conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel.” In Keller’s words, “The gospel needs to be applied to every area of one’s thinking, feeling, relating, working, and behaving.”⁴⁰

Second, and related to the first, by incorporating biblical theology with expository preaching, preachers also will avoid the pitfall of treating biblical stories simply as moral examples to follow. Many preachers look at the text, such as stories about David, and make the sermon a basic character study. While there are many examples to be learned from characters in the text, one should be careful about making that the totality of the sermon. A moral example is not wrong in and of itself, but it is problematic if it is done by itself. If Christianity is about grace-enabled, gospel-centered living, then our exhortations should be rooted in God’s grace that give the listeners hope because of the accomplishments of Christ. For it is by God’s grace that we are saved, set apart, and enabled to be people of moral excellence, who reflect and rejoice in God’s glory.

³⁷Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 281-282.

³⁸Ibid., 282-288.

³⁹Tim Keller, “The Centrality of the Gospel” [article on-line]; available from <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/index.cfm?fuseaction=tkeller>; Internet; accessed 5 March, 2007.

⁴⁰Ibid. See also Gal. 3:1-3.

Third, by integrating biblical theology with expository preaching, the preacher will be able to confront the postmodern culture that does not have knowledge of the biblical meta-narrative. The degree of biblical literacy today seems to be growing increasingly. Therefore, it seems to be a necessity that preachers give the hearers “the big picture” on a consistent basis. Indeed, Christ-centered exposition is needed in every generation, but this particular generation seems to even intensify the need for preachers to preach the forest and the trees.