

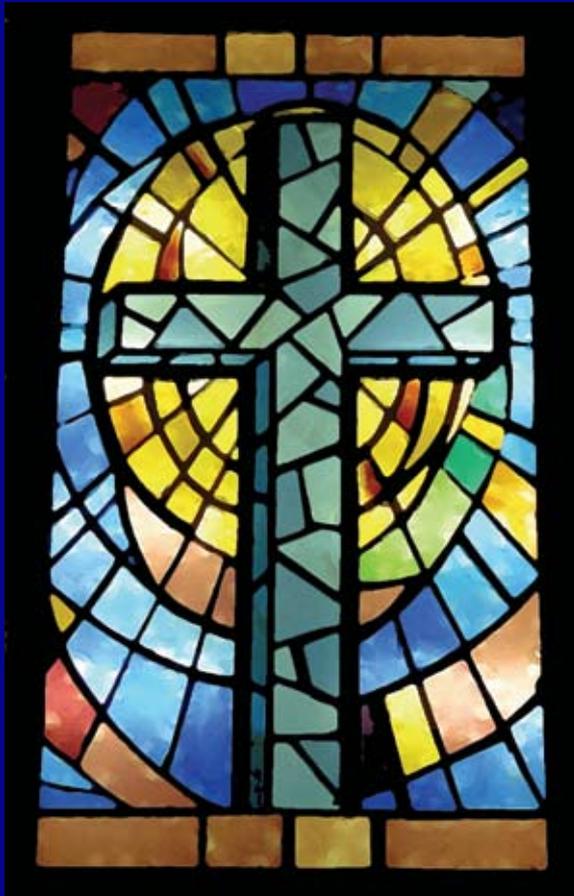
The Founders Journal



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CHRIST-CENTERED PREACHING

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Dr Fred Malone is the guest editor for this issue of the *Founders Journal*.

Is Preaching Foolish Today?

Fred A. Malone

It takes little Bible study to see that preaching, the proclamation of God's Word, was God's chosen method for evangelism and edification by the Old Testament prophets, our Lord and His apostles. The question is: "Is preaching foolish *today*?" Should we follow the example of the prophets, our Lord and His apostles? Is it necessary to obey Paul's command to Timothy: "PREACH the word!"

In the Bible, preaching is the proclamation (heralding) and explanation of God's revealed Word to man. It is an outward call to all men to "be still, and know that I am God." It is a call to be still and listen to God's revelation to man; to quit dwelling on our own thoughts and start thinking about God's truth. It is God's chosen way and authoritative charge to reveal, herald, His truth to mankind (2 Timothy 4:1-2).

The New Testament provides many examples of proclaiming God's Word. These include the Sermon on the Mount, Peter's message at Pentecost, Paul on Mar's Hill and the Epistles read in their entirety to the attentive and listening churches (Colossians 4:16). This act of "proclaiming" is different from activities such as personal witnessing and interactive teaching, which the apostles did as well. Preaching is not about equal interaction between the speaker and the hearer. It is about being still and listening to God's proclaimed truth which is wiser than man's thoughts.

Do you believe preaching is the God-ordained means to bring sinners to bow before Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Do you believe preaching is the God-ordained means to edify and strengthen the faith of God's people as they gather for congregational worship? I would venture to say that most Baptist preachers would give a hearty "Amen" to these questions. However, all is not well in our Baptist Zion.

The Regulative Principle and Preaching

Preaching is often regarded as "foolish" today. It is being set aside in many churches in favor of more culturally "relevant" methods to evangelize the lost and edify the saints. Many consider plays, athletic displays, panel discussions, musical extravaganzas, movies, multi-media presentations, clowns, puppets and sacred dance as "more relevant" to our media generation than a "long and boring" sermon

from the Bible heralded by one man speaking to men. Yet, with his last words, Paul commanded, charged, Timothy: “*Preach* the Word!” He did not call him to adapt this method of proclamation to the entertainment methods of his own contemporary culture. In Paul’s day Greek plays, athletic contests, magic shows, circus acts, give-and-take debates were all popular forms of entertainment. Yet Paul did not encourage churches to wed the gospel to such forms for the sake of evangelism or relevance. No! Paul held to preaching, the proclamation of God’s Word to men—to the very end of his life—no matter the culture, Jew or Gentile.

He commanded Timothy to “*Preach* the Word”, to herald the revelation of God to men, no matter what the hearers think or desire:

Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Timothy 4:2–5).

Even in a first-century A. D. culture of sports, drama, philosophical debate and inductive educational discussion, Paul steadfastly observed “the regulative principle” of Scripture. That is, he practiced what God had commanded and regulated by revelation to him: *preaching* God’s Word! Our Lord commanded Paul to preach and Paul commanded Timothy to stay with God’s method no matter what the hearer thinks.

Yet, one youth director of an SBC mega-church recently ridiculed the idea of children listening to a boring “talking head” (preaching) when they will pay more attention to a children’s show format filled with comedy, music, skits, on-stage dancing, plus a relevant message in their language. Poor Paul, he should have known better than to have Ephesians read in its entirety with the children present (Ephesians 6:1-4). They must have been bored out of their skulls to have to sit still and listen to God’s infallible, saving, Word! Paul should have been more creative for the children—more relevant!

Our Baptist forefathers would have considered these “relevant” and “creative” innovations in our worship services to be a violation of the biblical regulative principle of worship. Yet this principle is the very reason we are Baptists. It is the “forming principle” of Baptist churches. We only baptize according to the actual commands and examples of Scripture—confessing disciples alone. To violate the regulative principle of Baptist worship and practice, by substituting preaching with creative methods, is to deny the theology that shaped our identity!

Preaching and teaching God’s Word is the primary God-ordained means commanded in the regulative principle of Scripture to bring sinners to Christ and to edify God’s people. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” Our Lord and His apostles commanded:

“... and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

“... but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2).

Preaching is the heralded manifestation of God’s truth to men. It is not meant to be a debate, nor entertaining. It is meant to call men to be quiet and to listen to God’s revealed truth; then, to respond to God’s authoritative truth with faith. To substitute innovative and unauthorized methods in our worship services, which rob the hearers of Christ’s method and words, is to harm their eternal souls.

God has ordained sinners to be still and know that He is God through the proclamation of His Word to their deaf and fallen ears. It brings Him glory when the Holy Spirit gives them ears to hear His infallible Word and be saved by faith in the truth—proclaimed by the foolishness of preaching!

Preaching God’s Word seems foolish to our culture; of course, it always has been that way. Yet through this “foolishness of preaching,” God honors Himself to show that salvation is a miracle, not of man’s doing and man’s creative methods. Man in sin is dead and blind. Newer methods or more innovative approaches cannot move his will or awaken his heart. Only the Word of God proclaimed, as it is applied by the sovereign work of the Spirit, can bring him hope and life.

If we say we believe in God’s infallible Word as the authority of our faith and practice, then we must follow God’s commands and examples in preaching to men. We must allow Scripture alone to regulate our message and methods. The issue today in the SBC is not Scripture inerrancy, but the sufficiency and authority of Scripture for all matters of faith and practice.

All Means to Save Some?

But, you say, “Paul was willing to try new methods, any method, to save sinners.” Was he? Let us look more closely to what he actually said:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I may be partaker of it with you. Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain

it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:19–27).

Paul states here that he was willing to forgo the abrogated Jewish laws of clean and unclean foods *in his personal behavior* in order to witness to Gentiles. If he was with Jews, he observed the Jewish ceremonial laws that foods might not be a stumbling block to hearing the gospel preached. This personal accommodation of his behavior was to save those with whom he ate, to let nothing hinder his preaching of Christ! Paul did not give up his method of *preaching* to cultural accommodation and pure pragmatism!

Paul never used the contemporary means of Greek play-forms, or called on a Greek athlete for a testimony or power-lifting display, to get more acceptance of the gospel through cultural adaptation; though he could have done just that. Rather, he used the metaphor of athletic contests, running and boxing, to illustrate how he disciplined himself to be a faithful witness, especially in his preaching! “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” does not mean that Paul had a license from God to invent new means to evangelize or edify. He is speaking of his own personal accommodating behavior to the Old Testament law, or not, while he kept faithfully proclaiming, preaching, heralding the gospel both to Jew and Gentile! He believed that both his message and method should be regulated by God’s revelation.

Pragmatism over Preaching

Blatant pragmatism, the darling of today’s churches, cannot be justified from Scripture. “Whatever works” is a denial of the sufficiency and authority of inerrant Scripture to guide both our message and our methods. The lack of committed and Bible-filled preaching in favor of pragmatism is killing our churches today. Those who are committed to biblical, expository preaching of the Sacred Text are often accused of “boring sermons” or “preaching over the heads of our people.” Yet, ironically, many Bible and PCA churches are growing by that very method.

The truth is that shallow preaching and pragmatic programming is killing our SBC churches. This is why we see so many of our SBC members fleeing to Bible churches, PCA churches and independent churches to find serious preaching and teaching of God’s Word. If someone in the SBC agencies had the courage to poll how many members and pastors of these Bible-teaching churches are former Southern Baptists, they might be unpleasantly surprised!

Instead of blasting “traditional preaching” as the reason why churches are not growing (which is false), we need to be asking why tens of thousands of SBC churches are not growing due to shallow preaching and pragmatic methods. We

need to ask why the many baptisms using pragmatic, unbiblical methods is producing a crop of uncommitted church members. Our SBC rolls are full of them!

Every time a church substitutes another “new method” which robs the hearer of the words of Christ proclaimed, they are robbing the hearer of the words through which faith comes. If God has commanded preaching as the foolish means to save sinners, then those who disobey God and use other “worldly wiser” means are being foolish—with the eternal souls of men.

Pragmatism in worship and witness is undermining biblical authority and the sufficiency of Scripture in the SBC. While we fight for an inerrant Bible, many ignore its commands and examples to form our worship and witness. The testimony of many young and old biblically-minded SBC pastors, who still believe literally in “preach the Word”, is that they have had to endure much criticism for being “boring” while members seek other SBC churches with a more “relevant” worship style or children’s ministry. Every time a church down the street turns to pragmatic, non-authorized means to attract the masses, a true biblical and preaching ministry is damaged, eternal souls are deprived of God’s Word and God’s authority in His preached Word is dishonored.

Dare we forget that the whole church was assembled when the Ephesian elders read Paul’s letter to the adults and children (also an example of substantial reading of Scripture in worship)? Dare we accuse Jesus and the apostles of being “irrelevant” in their method of the proclamation of God’s truth? Were they culturally insensitive to the felt needs of men? No. Few would dare to come out and say such a thing in public. But the public worship and evangelistic methods of many SBC churches are saying so. May God bring us to repentance!

Yes, Preaching God’s Word is Foolishness

Paul said so.

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Corinthians 1:21–25)

Preaching is foolishness when you consider that the Jews wanted spectacular shows of signs and wonders. Preaching is foolishness when you consider that the Greeks wanted philosophical reasoning about how to live a happy life. Preaching is foolishness to today’s sound-bite culture and seeker-friendly methods. But Paul would have none of that. He believed and followed “the foolishness of God” in obeying Christ’s command to preach God’s Word. He understood that God is

exalted and glorified through “the foolishness of preaching.” He understood that all men are spiritually dead and need to hear God’s pure and unadulterated Word to be saved:

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:1–5).

God’s wisdom and power is glorified through the foolishness of preaching. Those who think God needs the help of creative and relevant cultural methods to bring sinners to salvation have demeaned the wisdom and power of God to save through His preached Word and Spirit’s regenerating work with the Word. They have denied the very truth and authority and sufficiency of the Word of God which they are so concerned that others believe.

The Foolishness of God

Those who reject or ridicule the priority of preaching God’s Word to men are refusing to become fools for Christ’s sake. For the method of proclamation of God’s Word is, by God’s own Word: “The foolishness of God.” Paul refused to become a huckster of God’s Word, but he was content to be a fool for Christ. If in preaching the Word of God, I should be called a fool, I am well content with that label. Paul said:

For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God (2 Corinthians 2:17).

We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor (1 Corinthians 4:10).

Paul refused to be a peddler, an entertainer of the gospel in order to be popular with the unconverted masses or wrong-thinking church members. He stayed with God’s ordained message and method his whole life. He was content being considered a fool, without honor among men, for believing and preaching the Word of God.

Conclusion

Are you content with being a fool for Christ, dear pastor? Are you content with God's Word which defines the message and the method of your work? Or, do you so wish to be liked and considered "successful" by men that you are willing to reject God's method to bring His message to men?

We need a return to biblical preaching to be faithful to God and to be "successful" in His eyes. We need to believe that men are so dead in trespasses and sin and blindness that only "the foolishness of preaching" will glorify God when His preached Word and Spirit's work opens a blind, deaf and dead sinner's heart. We need to believe again that if anyone is saved through "the foolishness of preaching," it is a miracle of God! If that is being a fool, then I am well content with being a fool for Christ through practicing "the foolishness of preaching." What about you? ☺

First words from the Metropolitan Tabernacle:

Iwould propose that the subject of the ministry as long as this platform shall stand, and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshippers, shall be the person of JESUS CHRIST. I am never ashamed to avow myself a Calvinist; I do not hesitate to take the name of Baptist; but if I am asked what is my creed, I reply: "IT IS JESUS CHRIST." My venerated processor, Dr. Gill, has left a Body of Divinity, admirable and excellent in its way; but the Body of Divinity to which I would pin and bind myself for ever, God helping me, is not his system or any other human treatise, but Christ Jesus, Who is the sum and substance of the gospel, Who is in Himself all theology, the incarnation of every precious truth, the all-glorious embodiment of the way, the truth and the life.

— Charles H. Spurgeon

Is Christ-Centered Preaching A Biblical Mandate?

Fred A. Malone

Preaching is God's ordained method for the pastor—but not just any kind of preaching! Our Lord and His apostles were masters of *Christ-centered preaching*. Every Word our Lord uttered ultimately was about His Person and work as our Prophet, Priest and King; especially when He expounded Old Testament texts! And the apostles followed suit. Every evangelistic sermon and every epistle was centered on Jesus Christ. Every application to the hearer's life calling for obedience and faith was founded upon His Person and perfect work.

Christ-centered preaching is more than:

- Preaching an expository sermon, even from a New Testament text, yet without mentioning Christ except in some sort of evangelistic appeal at the end
- Preaching a sermon filled with illustrations and humor while only nominally mentioning a text, or Jesus Christ Himself, once in a while
- Preaching a “relevant” message with adjectives like “exciting, awesome, extreme, life-changing, etc.,” without explaining God's written Word and the Person and work of Christ
- Preaching a “practical series” on marriage, joy, etc., without explaining how the Person and work of Jesus Christ applies to marriage, joy, etc.

None of the above measures up to true Christ-centered preaching. Much passes for “biblical preaching” today without enough of Christ in the message to save an unbeliever or increase the believer's understanding of Christ-centered living.

I have spent most of my vacations for over 35 years visiting SBC churches. On two hands, I can count the number of sermons I have heard that were truly Christ-centered, even from conservative, Bible-believing preachers. I believe we need to reform our preaching to make it more Christ-centered today. So, the first question to ask is this: Is Christ-centered preaching a biblical mandate?

It is a biblical mandate to preach Christ to all men

It is clear that the apostles preached Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to the unconverted (Acts 5:42, 8:35, 11:20). He was the center of their message. When Paul first came to Corinth, he said:

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and man, His Person and work, was the subject matter of Paul's evangelistic preaching in Corinth. But that is not all. Paul preached Jesus Christ to Christians as well. You cannot read his epistles, which were read in their entirety to the churches, without seeing that he rehearsed the Person and work of Jesus Christ as the power of their salvation and the center point of their sanctification. To the Colossians, Paul described his preaching and teaching to Christians:

We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ (Colossians 1:28).

Paul's message, even for Christians, was to proclaim Christ to make every man complete in Him. Should we do any less? It is a biblical mandate to preach Christ to unbeliever and believer!

It is a biblical mandate to preach all of Christ

We must preach Christ to all men, but we must also preach all of Christ—His beauty, His perfections, His righteousness, His glories—His life and death and resurrection and ascension. We must faithfully declare the gospel “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). We must call upon all sinners to repent and believe in the resurrected Lord.

Yet we often hear little of Jesus' resurrection in evangelistic presentations and preaching today. The emphasis upon the need to go to heaven, the need to be happy, even the need to be forgiven, often receives more place in preaching than the glory of Jesus Christ in His perfect life, horrifying death, glorious resurrection, almighty reign, sobering judgment, and glorious return. In fact, there is more said in the evangelistic messages of Acts on the reality of His resurrection and exaltation than even His cross! For the cross means nothing without His glorious resurrection and exaltation in victory over sin, Satan, death and hell for repentant and believing sinners.

When is the last time you preached the gospel to sinners and emphasized Jesus' resurrection, that He is God and He is alive, bringing each hearer, condemned in their Law-breakings, face-to-face with the Resurrected One? This alone is Christ-centered evangelistic preaching! This alone pierces the heart by the Holy Spirit to cause sinners to fall down to Christ for mercy and salvation. This alone carries the idea of a faith in Him that also includes submission to Him as Lord of one's life.

It is a theological mandate to preach Christ in every sermon

Since Genesis 3:15, Jesus Christ is the patent center of God's revelation to man. Adam represented us and fell into sin, breaking God's covenant requiring perfect law-obedience. Now, Jesus Christ, the last Adam, is the only Mediator between God and man. He is the only Savior of sinners and Lord of the saved. The entire Old Testament is subservient to revealing His coming. The entire New Testament is the revelation of His coming to mankind and the explanation of how the Old Testament is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes, in the rediscovery of biblical truth and the reformed faith of our Baptist forefathers, we hear phrases like this: "the central truth of all Scripture is the sovereignty of God over all things" or "the central truth of all Scripture is the glory of God." Sometimes we hear sermons and read books glorifying the sovereignty and glory of God. But, even then, something is often missing: Jesus Christ and Him crucified, risen, reigning and coming—His Person and work.

I believe that God is sovereign over all things, and that everything is for His glory, rightly understood and deserved. But if you ask me what is the center point of Scripture in revealing His glory and sovereignty to man, it must be said in the clearest of terms that it is Jesus Christ, His Person and work. It is a theological mandate to preach Christ in all the Scriptures.

Preaching Christ from the Old Testament

The Old Testament is theologically centered in Jesus Christ. Our Lord taught this to the disciples on the Emmaus road:

Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27).

When Adam fell into sin, he brought our whole race into condemnation under God's Law (Romans 2:14–16; 5:12–19). His fall brought the need of a Savior into history. This is why the Law of God must be preached to all men to show them that they are sinners (Romans 3:19–20). Yet, from Genesis 3:15, God promised Satan that the Seed of the Woman would bruise him on the head. This is Christ alone, the hope of sinners, the last Adam who brings redemption from sin against God and His Law. We must preach both the Law and the gospel to be faithful to the theology of Scripture.

This promise of Christ to come was slowly unfolded in the Old Testament "covenants of promise" as Paul calls them (Ephesians 2:12), until the Seed to whom the promises were ultimately made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel and David came with His new and everlasting covenant of peace (Galatians 3; Jeremiah 31:31–34, 32:40; Isaiah 54:10, 55:3, 61:8; Ezekiel 16:60, 24:25; Hebrews 8:8–10, 13:20).

The Old Testament saints were justified by faith in the promise of Christ to come (Romans 4, Hebrews 11, James 2). The New Covenant of Jesus Christ was so prophesied and foreshadowed in the Old Testament that we may legitimately preach any Old Testament text where it fits into the history of redemption pointing to the future coming of our dear Lord.

For example, if we preach from God's Law (the Ten Words), it foreshadows the perfections of Christ and the need of His atonement. If we preach from an historical narrative, its ultimate meaning is to sustain the lineage of Jesus. If we preach from the prophets, they condemn the broken Sinai Covenant yet point to the covenant mercies of God in the future Messiah. If we preach from the Wisdom literature, its ultimate fulfillment is in Jesus Christ, in whom is hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Peter summarized the meaning of the Old Testament:

As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look (1 Peter 1:10–12).

The New Testament interprets theologically how the Old Testament taught of Christ. The Old Testament is theologically centered in Christ. This is why He must be proclaimed from every Old Testament text.

Preaching Christ from the New Testament

The New Testament is theologically centered in Jesus Christ. John 1:1–18 tells of the eternal history of the Word of God—the One who is God, who made all things, who came to His own, who was rejected of men, but who gives eternal life to all who believe and receive Him as Lord. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself is that Light of the world in whom God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit has revealed Himself to man:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He

has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they (Hebrews 1:1–4).

In the face of Jesus Christ, we see the Trinitarian God revealed to man. As He said: “He that has seen Me has seen the Father.” The Christian faith is a Trinitarian faith theologically. But both the Old Testament and the New Testament require theologically that Christ remains the center of the revelation of this Trinitarian God to man. Though He may not be mentioned by name in every text of Scripture, He is at the center of every text of Scripture. For He is the reason the Old Testament history continued after the Fall; and He is the reason the New Testament revelation was given by the Father through the Holy Spirit.

We need to remember that each verse in Scripture should be interpreted by all of Scripture. Therefore, true expository preaching always brings the Person and work of Jesus Christ, who is the center of Scripture, into each text. This is especially true of the New Testament epistles and letters to the saints. Let me give you some examples of what I mean.

How does one preach Christ from Romans 8:28?

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

Once I heard a sermon by a very good man on this text about the Providence and Sovereignty of God in all the life of a Christian. It really was very good in its exposition of the words and grammar of the text. However, there was no mention of Jesus Christ till the conclusion of the sermon when the preacher called on the hearers to believe in Christ for salvation. I do not recall that he mentioned either the deity of Christ, the atonement of the cross, or His resurrected glory. I am glad that Christ was mentioned, but I am sad that He never actually was preached at the center of the text. For, you see, the reason we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose, is because of the Person and work of Jesus Christ. In the immediate context of Romans 8:28, Paul explains how we “know” that God the Father will work all things together for good:

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who

is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us (Romans 8:29–34).

The very reason we “know” that God will work all things together for good for the saints is because:

- (1) He has predestined all whom He foreknew to be conformed to the image of Christ, His Divine Son;
- (2) And all whom He predestined He effectually calls and justifies by faith alone in Jesus’ blood and righteousness to be safely brought to glory, no matter what trials enter their life;
- (3) And, the proof that He works all things together for good like this is that if He delivered His Son up for us all, how will He not also freely give us all things:
- (4) And, we know that all things work together for good because the risen Son of God is seated at the right hand of God the Father continually interceding for us.

In other words, to preach the Providence of God for the saints without being Christ-centered in the explanation and application is not being faithful to the context, which is Christ-centered for the saints!

How does one preach Christ from 1 Peter 4:19?

Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right (1 Peter 4:19).

In such a text, do you just appeal to the sovereign will of God who does what He wants? Do you just appeal to God as our faithful Creator who always does what is right? Therefore, you just quit complaining and endure suffering because of the sovereign will of a righteous God? Of course not! Such an explanation could be preached by a Muslim! This text is given in the context of the whole book of 1 Peter. Peter has given a veritable theology of suffering in his letter, based wholly upon the Person and work of Jesus Christ! We trust in the faithful Creator who does only what is right because He has proven His faithfulness and sovereignty in the suffering of Christ for our salvation and comfort.

In the broader context of Scripture interpreting Scripture, Peter explains why we can trust in the sovereign God during suffering according to His will:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are

chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:1–9).

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls (1 Peter 2:21–25).

Peter went to the Gospels and preached the Person and work of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, risen, exalted and coming again to comfort these suffering Christians. He calls them to trust in the sovereign God who sent His Son to suffer on their behalf, Who Himself entrusted Himself while suffering to His Father who judges righteously, Who uttered no threats and did not attack those who persecuted Him.

The comfort of Christians in suffering is not the bare sovereignty of a right God, but the God who had a purpose in sending His own Son to suffer for them, and Who bore that suffering with trust in the God who was providing the salvation of sinners.

To preach 1 Peter 4:19 without a full display of the context centered in Jesus Christ and Him crucified, raised, ascended, and coming again cannot comfort Christians in trial nor display the salvation of God to the unconverted present. It may be textual preaching of some sort, but it is not true, expository, Christ-centered preaching!

How can you preach Paul's exhortation to love one's neighbor through fulfilling the laws of the 10 Commandments in Romans 13:8–10 if you do not refer to the Christ who perfectly loved you and said: "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15).

How can you teach church members to love one another, to put away all bitterness, malice, clamor, and slander, unless you remind them of Christ?

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:32).

How can you encourage yourself and other pastor friends to be faithful in their labors, especially when you are being opposed and see so little fruit? Paul gave the secret of his perseverance in these words:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart... (2 Corinthians 4:1).

Having received the mercies of God through Jesus Christ, remembering the life, death, resurrection, ascension and coming of His Lord, Paul did not lose heart when he ministered to the cynical and hard faces of men. His remembrance of mercy through Jesus Christ fueled his heart to persevere.

The application of Jesus Christ, His Person and work, to the saints in the different situations of life is the necessity of true expository, Christ-centered preaching. The examples of the New Testament preaching are the models for us. To leave out the whole message of God's grace in Christ while preaching particular texts is not preaching "the whole counsel of God." In fact, it is hiding Christ from His own people. It is robbing them of the gospel which first saved them and which is necessary to continue to believe in order that they may lead faithful, Christ-centered lives.

It is theologically necessary to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified, risen, reigning and returning in every sermon. Therefore, Christ-centered preaching teaches Christ from every text, not forcing it, nor allegorizing it, but through understanding theologically that all of God's revelation to man is about and through Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Word. It is a theological mandate to preach Christ to all men from all the Scriptures. Christ-centered preaching is "theology on fire" with Jesus Christ.

Objections to Christ-centered preaching

Some object to Christ-centered preaching from every text because we must be exegetically constrained by the subject matter of each text. Therefore, they say, it is legitimate to preach a sermon from an Old Testament or New Testament text without even mentioning Jesus Christ, His Person or His work.

This objection does not stand because exegesis of a text is only the foundation of preaching the meaning of the text enlightened by all of Scripture. We believe in the *analogy of faith*, or, Scripture interpreting Scripture. After studying all of Scripture, we understand that the meaning of any text or subject must be subservient to its place in the totality of the message of Scripture, which is Jesus Christ.

Others object that if we just preach expositively through Scripture, we will give the whole counsel of God and eventually preach all of Christ over a period of time. So, we do not have to preach the Person and work of Jesus Christ in every text.

Neither does this objection stand up to the commands and examples of preaching in the Scripture. For example, if we preach through the Sermon on the Mount verse-by-verse, remaining strictly to each text, we must recognize that Christ Himself is not mentioned in most of the texts. However, we cannot preach any Beatitude without remembering WHO preached it, and how HE HIMSELF fulfilled it through His life and work. Who is more spiritually poor than the One who became sin for us? Who mourns more than the Man of Sorrows acquainted with grief? Who is more meek than He who emptied Himself unto death for others? Who hungered and thirsted for righteousness more than our dear Lord? Who was more merciful, pure in heart, peacemaking, or persecuted for righteousness sake than our Lord Jesus Christ? Who fulfilled the Law against murder, adultery, false vows, loving one's enemy more than Jesus Christ? Whose prayer life was more constant and humble than our dear Lord's?

Shall we wait in preaching Christ's Person and work in the Sermon on the Mount till the very end when He condemns false converts at the judgment? Of course not! The *analogy of faith* requires that we preach Him all through the text. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said:

The right use of systematic theology is, that when you discover a particular doctrine in your text, you check it, and control it, by making sure that it fits into this whole body of biblical doctrine which is vital and essential.

In other words, I am contending that our primary call is to deliver this whole message, this 'whole counsel of God', and that this is always more important than the particulars, the particular parts and portions. Perhaps I can clarify this by reminding you that it is obvious that in New Testament times, and in the early days of the Christian Church, they did not preach in the manner that has become customary with us. They did not take a text out of the New Testament and analyse it and expound it and then apply it, because they did not have the New Testament. Well, what did they preach? They preached the great message that had been committed to them, this great body of truth, this whole doctrine of salvation. My argument is that this is what we should always be doing, though we do it through individual expositions of particular texts. That is, to me, in general the relationship between theology and preaching.¹

Exegetical, expositional, Christ-centered preaching does not wait for weeks till we get to a text that verbally mentions Christ. It is “theology on fire” with Jesus Christ. It preaches Christ in all the Scriptures—in every sermon! It preaches the whole counsel of God to the whole man.

Conclusion

Dear preacher, is this how you preach Christ in all the Scriptures? Is this your controlling principle as you study each text? Is this how you preach “the whole counsel of God”? If it is not, you may be guilty of hiding Christ from your hearers. Instead, consider the whole message of the Bible as you preach each text. Let Scripture interpret Scripture!

Christ-centered preaching is mandated biblically and theologically in the Bible. We must be men saturated with Scripture and saturated with Christ revealed in Scripture so that we can set Him before the lost and found ears of our hearers. As an old Anglican, Bishop Reynolds, exhorted preachers:

Preach Christ Jesus the Lord. Determine to know nothing among your people, but Christ crucified. Let his name and grace, his spirit and love, triumph in the midst of all your sermons. Let your great end be to glorify him in the heart, to render him amiable and precious in the eyes of his people, to lead them to him, as a sanctuary to protect them, a propitiation to reconcile them, a treasure to enrich them, a physician to heal them, an advocate to present them and their services to God, as wisdom to counsel them, as righteousness to justify, as sanctification to renew, as redemption to save. Let Christ be the diamond to shine in the bosom of all your sermons.²

Christ-centered preaching is mandated by Scripture and best exemplified by our Lord and His apostles. After many ages, it still must be our determination to know nothing among men but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, risen, exalted, and returning—both to sinners and to saints! ☞

Notes:

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (London: Hodder and Staughton, 1972), 66–67. I believe this book to be the contemporary classic for preaching. Buy it and read it!

² Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust), 258. This book, I believe, is the greatest work ever printed for the pastoral ministry outside the Bible. It is the primary textbook I would use to teach a course on pastoral theology. Buy it and read it, too!

News

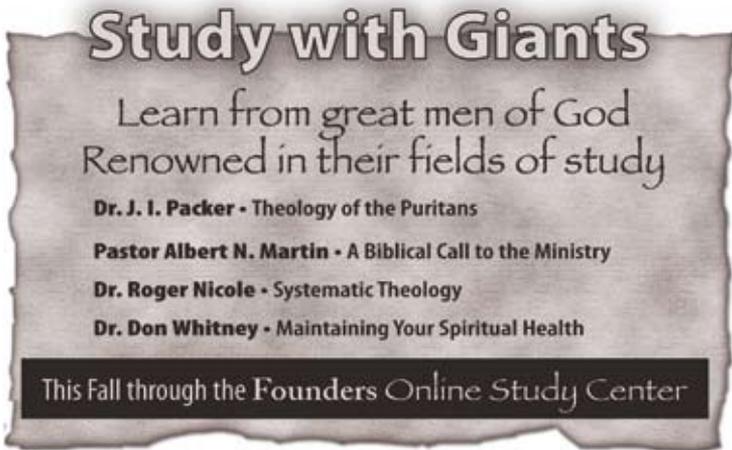
Make plans now to attend the **2007 Southern Baptist Founders Conference**, June 26–29, hosted by Bethel Baptist Church in Owasso, OK. This will be the 25th anniversary of the conference. The theme will be *“God’s Truth Abideth Still: Confronting Postmodernism”* with keynote speaker Dr. David Wells.

The **Mid-South Regional Founders Conference** will be held October 5–7, 2006 at South Woods Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. The theme will be “A Passion for Missions” with keynote speaker Michael Haykin.

<http://www.midsouthfounders.org/>

The **Southwest Regional Founders Conference** will be held September 27–28, 2006 at Heritage Baptist Church in Mansfield, Texas. The theme will be “Christianity and the Culture” with keynote speaker Earl Blackburn.

<http://www.founders.org/conferences.html>

A graphic with a parchment-like background and a dark banner at the bottom. The text is centered and reads: "Study with Giants" in a large, bold, serif font. Below it, in a smaller serif font, is "Learn from great men of God Renowned in their fields of study". Underneath are four lines of text, each starting with a name and a topic: "Dr. J. I. Packer • Theology of the Puritans", "Pastor Albert N. Martin • A Biblical Call to the Ministry", "Dr. Roger Nicole • Systematic Theology", and "Dr. Don Whitney • Maintaining Your Spiritual Health". At the bottom, a dark banner contains the text "This Fall through the Founders Online Study Center" in a white serif font.

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Preaching the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ

Geoff Thomas

We are informed that Philip told the Ethiopian “the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35). It is His gospel; it is all about Him. He is its source and theme. The good news is Jesus Christ, in the glory of His person and the perfection of His finished work. And He is for every sinner. I can go to any person and I can say to them, “I have a Savior for you.” And if I don’t continually use those precise words like some mantra nevertheless that precise conviction is part of my theological universe. I believe that I have a Teacher who will overcome your ignorance. I have a great Priest who will speak on your behalf to God. I have a Lord who will protect and keep you, and He is for you. I can use the language of the Marrow men without any reservation. I am not using the preposition “for” in the sense of substitution but in the sense of offer. Christ’s teaching—for you. Christ dead—for you. Christ reigning—for you. Christ interceding—for you, that is, for you to receive, to have and to hold in this world and the next, to know His protection and be educated by Him.

Preach the Fullness of Christ in the Gospel

One Christ—of course in three offices (Prophet, Priest and King), of course in two natures (divine and human), and of course in three states (pre-incarnate, incarnate and glorified)—but still one Christ. One Christ—of course one in being and substance with the Father and the Spirit—the triune God. But one indivisible Christ who is a powerful King, an instructing Prophet and a serving Savior. You cannot separate Him when you offer Him to sinners. Think of a computer, and [1] the power of its motor, and [2] the instructions of its screen, and [3] all the services that it provides you—e-mail, wake-up calls, diary, spread sheets, the Net. Could you go into a computer store and say that you want a computer which only does the services—without the power-box and without the screen? The assistant would say to you that that was impossible, that the box and the modem and the services provided are all one, and you cannot have the one without the others too. He would say to you that what you would like is impossible, for a PC is one.

So it is with Christ, the gospel is that the sovereign Lord who directs and protects, is also the great Prophet who teaches and enlightens, and also the High Priest whose blood de-sins and whose righteousness wraps us about safe and

sound for time and eternity. This one Savior is freely offered to all. He is one God and Surety and by Himself He has fulfilled all those three offices for every one of His people. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...” He said, and in all these ways He serves His people. God doesn’t do half a job. He does not leave us washed, but lacking His protection. He does not leave us informed, but in our guilt and shame. He does not leave us shepherded, but in the dark. I am saying that we cannot disconnect His offices. You have neither the wit nor the power to disentangle them, and anyone who tells you he can is deceiving himself and the truth is not in him.

- I have Prophet Christ who will teach you who you are, who God is, what the good life is, what you must do to be saved, how you can inherit eternal life, what lies beyond death. That is the message we have for everyone.
- I have Priest Christ whose blood cleanses us from all sin, no matter who you are, where you come from, what your reputation has been or the quality of your life. Here is the remedy for every guilty conscience, here is peace for every troubled soul, here is the source of a clean heart.
- I have King Christ whose Lordship is such that He has put everything under an obligation that if it touches me in any way, as shattering as the crash of a plane or as gentle as a mother’s kiss on the cheek of her sleeping child—the best things that happen to me and the worst things that affect me— He will ensure it must work for my good.

This complete Christ of the three offices is for you. I am saying that this is our message in the glory of the gospel. God draws near and He makes men an offer. God visits and makes us a proposition. God offers forgiveness. He promises more. He offers us Himself: “I will be your God. I will bless you with every spiritual blessing.” And what is unbelief? It is the rejection of that offer.

Preach the Urgency of Immediate Faith in the Christ of the Gospel

We can listen to our young people as they look back at us Sunday by Sunday, a glazed look customarily having fallen over their eyes, and then they graciously condescend to discuss with us their position, and they will always describe it in a different way. They will try to give the impression that their position is something rather strong and positive, that they are *seeking*, that they are *searching*, that they are *considering*, that they are approaching this whole matter of the glories of the person and work of Christ from a position of strength, that they are *sifting the evidence*, that they are *examining the facts*.

I would say to them that that is not the way it is. The way it is is that they know the facts and they have heard the offer and they refuse to bow the knee and they will not yield the heart. The way it is is that they will not accept the offer God

makes. It is not insufficiency of evidence keeping them away from Christ. Their chief need is not more time to think. That is not their problem. Everything hangs upon a commitment they will not make when God says “Come!”. Theirs is an attitude of disobedience and from it come many acts of disobedience.

Most of them are laying down conditions before God and they are saying that they will come when they’ve got the evidence, when they’ve established the foundation, when their hearts are strangely warmed, when their taste for the world is getting jaded, when they are sure God will answer them, when the hairs on the back of their necks stand on end. And to them all God is saying, “Come! Come as you are! Come with your weakness. Come with your mental reservations! Come as an ungodly man!

Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness he requireth
Is to feel you need of Him:
This he gives you—
‘Tis the Spirit’s rising beam.

Come, ye weary, heavy-laden,
Lost and ruined by the Fall;
If you wait until you’re better,
You will never come at all:
Not the righteous—
Sinners Jesus came to call.

We do not come as those who are absolutely persuaded. We do not come with strong faith. If our faith is as thin as a spider’s thread, as long as it is fixed in Christ alone, it is so infrangible it can take the weakest believer across the bottomless pit and over the lake of fire. “Come with smoking flax faith. Come with bruised reed faith. Come with every single one of your doubts and questions and perplexities. Come with your personality problems. Do not come as someone who has solved all his problems before he comes,” we tell them that plainly. That is our message. We tell them to take Christ now as we offer Him to them. Take Him! You bow to Christ when He is offered to you. You come to Christ when He invites you to draw near.

Preach the sincere offer of Christ to all men in the Gospel

Too many of our congregation have some half-understanding of the great doctrine of God’s sovereign grace in salvation, and so they are wresting it to their own destruction. I believe in a sovereign God and in sovereign grace, but I believe I am speaking His mind when I say to congregations that He loves weaklings and doubters and ungodly men and women so much that He offers Himself to them.

That is our message. I believe I am speaking His word when I say to them that He commands and beseeches them to come now to Him, and that He is ready to receive them now, and if they come now He will in no wise cast them out.

When favoured sinners hear the gospel they hear it in their shame. They feel that they are so unique in their sin. They are not like anyone else in the congregation. They feel they are personally disqualified because of their hypocrisy and weakness. They are conscious of the aggravation of their own condition. But God is bringing this message to them, that no matter who they are, what they have been or how they have lived, He will never cast out any who come to Him in repentance and faith. There has never been a single instance of rejection in the history of the world.

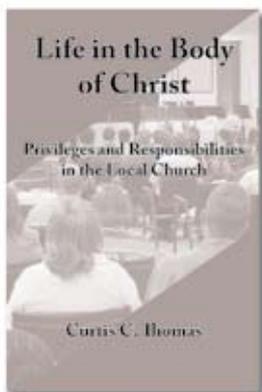
Can you imagine the angels looking down from the portals of heaven and they are concentrating just at this moment on the man who is the chief of sinners—the very worst one of all. He has been dormant for years, but he is stirring, and he is turning, and, yes, he is actually coming to Christ—in all his filth, pulling on the chains that tie him to all his past—and, yes, he is coming to the Son of God in the glory of His person and the perfection of His work. He is coming to the One who smote the fig-tree, to the One who called the Pharisees white-washed sepulchres and King Herod a fox. This blackguard who has committed the very worst sins the angels have ever beheld is coming to the One John saw on the Isle of Patmos before whose feet John fell as one dead. This piece of trash is crawling and limping and staggering to the One before whom the sinless seraphim hide their eyes, and the angels are looking at one another in amazement and they are saying, “No hope for that one! Not a chance! He’s for the pit!” And then they see something far more amazing so that there is utter silence in heaven. They see the Son of God running to that man lest he change his mind, and cutting short his rehearsed apologies, and they see Christ wrapping His arms around him and hugging him and Christ’s hot tears wetting that man’s cheeks, and God rejoicing and saying, “This my son was lost, and is found; he was dead and is alive again.”

There is nothing today more marvellous in the whole universe than that we can stand before a congregation in our frailty and youth and mortality burdened with all our personal inadequacies, facing many who have but the slightest interest even in Christian morality, and our message to every single one of them is that Jehovah God is offering Himself to them that moment to be their Savior and Prophet and Priest and King and Husband and Lover and Friend forever and ever. He is sincerely offering every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ Jesus to them.

We only long for them to stop rationalising their unbelief, and cease attempting to justify it. Do they want a warrant to come to Christ? Do they plead their unfitness because they do not have a warrant? Are they searching for a warrant in their own experience? Are they waiting for a verse to jump out at them one day and zap them? Those things may happen, but they are not the warrant for faith. They are looking in the wrong place if they are saying, “Give me an experience and then I can trust.” God says, “I will make you an offer: here is my Son, the

divinely appointed Prophet, the Priest and the King, and He is for you to receive now.” Those who receive Him to them He gives the right to become the sons of God. This is an utterly sincere and genuine offer. The Lord is not at the front of the meeting making this offer or we would ask sinners to come to the front to receive Him. The Lord is near you, in the message we preach, in your ears, in your conscience, in your heart, in your mouth, that whosoever calleth on the name of the Lord shall be saved. The Holy Spirit takes the message and the offer and He enables you to hear it, and he moves you to receive Him. He is being offered now. You accept this offer or you reject it. That is our message. It is a message of grace, and it is centred upon the Lord Jesus Christ. ☞

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About the Author: Curtis C. Thomas is a retired pastor, having served in Reformed Baptist churches for 30 years, the final 14 years at the Bible Church of Little Rock, AR. He is co-author of *Romans: An Interpretive Outline* and *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented*.

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Doctrinal Preaching

The Central Task of the Christian Minister

Tom J. Nettles

Before reading this article, review these texts: 1 Corinthians 2:6–13; 2 Corinthians 5:11–21; Ephesians 2:20–3:13; 4:7–16; Luke 24:25–27; 2 Timothy 1:8–15; 3:10–4:5.

Preaching that is not doctrinal is not preaching. The task of the Christian minister in his public proclamation amounts to this: the dissemination of a truth of divine revelation in such a way that each hearer will grasp the truth in content and be aware of how it should shape his thinking and conduct thus giving visibility to an incipient or increased love for God, love for fellow Christians, and love for neighbor.

Doctrinal preaching might, and often should, involve one of the great central themes that are reflected in the historic ecumenical and evangelical protestant confessions of faith. An excellent example of this comes to us in John Flavel's fifth sermon from *The Fountain of Life*. Each of the forty-two sermons, after a brief exposition of the text, deduces a doctrine that serves as the controlling idea for the sermon. Taking as his text John 1:14 in sermon five ("And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us"), Flavel set forth the doctrine: "That Jesus Christ did really assume the true and perfect nature of man, into a personal union with his divine nature, and still remains true God, and true man, in one person for ever."¹

An example of a doctrine, not expressed within the body of classical confessional theology, but nonetheless a truth of divine revelation and vitally related to the whole of redemptive revelation comes from Edward Veal's treatment of the confession from the converted thief, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Luke 23:42). After discussing the stark difference between the two thieves and giving special attention to the power and freeness of the divine grace that came to the penitent, Veal inferred the doctrinal proposition: "That though a very late, even a death-bed, repentance may be sincere, yet it is not safe to run the hazard of it."²

This article has the purpose of expressing several assumptions and convictional principles that necessarily produce doctrinal preaching.

Guiding Assumptions for Doctrinal Preaching

Doctrinal Preaching assumes that an objective divine revelation initiates Christian experience and is the perpetual arbiter of personal and corporate experience. Christian truth is revealed truth, it is big truth, pervasive and overwhelming in its scope. Unfolded in an inspired narrative, the resultant writing concerns God's redemptive operations toward a fallen creation in a way that preserves His holiness, reveals His attributes, and embraces sinners into an eternal love relationship intrinsic to the life of the triune God. In its whole, it constitutes one doctrine, and in its parts it contains many interrelated doctrines. The preacher must communicate both the whole and its parts in a way faithful to the inspired narrative. This task is doctrinal preaching.

While Paul pushed aside human wisdom and philosophy, considering it as pure rubbish compared to the glory of divine revelation, he nevertheless expressed pleasure in the wisdom and fullness of truth that he preached. The phrase "Christ and Him crucified" as a summary of his evangelism overflows with doctrinal implications. Who is Christ? Why was He both God and Man? Why is the unity of His person important? Is there significance in the fact that He died by execution under Roman law, under the instigation of Jewish religious leaders? What happened in His death beyond the merely physical? What must I believe about this death, and its implications about me, in order to derive its intended benefit? More questions are suggested by the pregnant summary of Paul's preaching, but the answer to each of these is doctrinal. Their doctrinal status does not render them less relevant to human experience; instead, these doctrines regulate and determine the genuineness of it.

The initiation of Christian experience through such a message means that the continued revolution of the redeemed human is a matter of doctrine also. Paul said that he spoke a wisdom among those who are mature (1 Corinthians 2:6). The words he spoke were taught by the divine Spirit designed to impart knowledge of "the things freely given to us from God" (1 Corinthians 2:12). This involved how Christ is made unto us wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification and redemption." Understanding these issues gives elevation and expansive power to the working of sanctifying grace. Paul's message, implanted experientially by the Holy Spirit, allowed each Christian to "appraise all things." Their complete renovation into Christlikeness depended on the continued doctrinal instruction through those that were faithful "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1).

Doctrinal Preaching always has the whole Bible for its text. No text can be taken in isolation from the whole message of Scripture. Everything included in the biblical text by the Holy Spirit's inspiration plays some part in filling out the complete picture. Some parts of Scripture loom so large that they almost appear complete in themselves. Christians often hear speakers point to John 3:16 as a text that could stand alone in its fullness and power and salvific efficacy. I personally doubt that. We may slip carelessly into such assumptions without realizing how

much we naturally import into such a text from our knowledge of the whole. Who is God? Who is His Son? What evidence exists that the Person Christians say is the Son of God, is actually the Son of God? Why is such a gift indicative of the sort of love God has for the world? What does it mean to perish and why is that a possibility for anyone? What constitutes belief? Does it naturally and necessarily imply “free will?” Does it come as a result of human volition from the perishing sinner’s natural state or does belief involve something effectually supernatural in its origin? What is everlasting life? Are we of such a nature that eternity should be a concern for us? Coherent and credible answers to these questions emerge only in the fullness of the biblical revelation. The big passages that seem to be self-contained in their biblical content gain their power over our souls only because they condense and use short-hand language for concepts that developed through many years and exude clarity within the framework of a multitude of texts, each text adding to the richness that dwells in the mature summary.

By the same token, apparently insignificant texts gain power beyond their immediate words and context in light of the teaching of the whole. “Their foot shall slide in due time” (Deuteronomy 32:35) served as the text for Jonathan Edwards’ sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. His exposition of the text itself and its historical context set the stage for a powerful sermon giving faithful exposition to the central idea of that text within the redemptive-historical flow of biblical theology.

Doctrinal Preaching recognizes the specific meaning of individual texts. Setting a text within its larger biblical framework must not make one ignore the specific meaning of the text itself. Its own particular grammar, its peculiar genre and the intent of the language in the flow of its immediate context must be foundational to the larger doctrinal inferences one draws from the text.

Francis Wayland gives good advice concerning the importance of this kind of careful engagement with texts as unique in their biblical function. After dismissing several types of erroneous uses of biblical texts, Wayland says, “We profess to believe that the revelation of God is pure truth from heaven; that the teaching found in that revelation is dictated by the Spirit of God, and contains within it the *mind of the Spirit*.” We are bound, therefore, to ascertain the mind of the Spirit “in that particular text; and having found this, to explain and enforce it upon our hearers.” As ambassadors of Christ we can do nothing less. In this way doctrine will be seen, not as the contrived imposition of human systems, but as the pure manifestation of divine truth. The minister will gain a profound, accurate, increasingly extensive and pastorally useful knowledge of the Word of God. In addition, the variety of uses and applications of biblical doctrine will be seen, in a most salutary way, as virtually endless. Wayland notes:

If we ascertain the precise meaning of the Spirit, and make this the theme of our discourse, we shall attain to endless variety. We can scarcely find two texts of Scripture which, if attentively considered, give us exactly the

same idea. Sometimes a truth is presented under one aspect, and sometimes under another. In our different places, the same duty is enforced by different considerations. By observing these different phases of the same truth, we shall be able to present it continually in different aspects, and thus avoid the necessity of ever repeating ourselves. If on the other hand, we pay no attention to the variety of circumstances with which the Spirit of God has associated it, we shall fall into abstract views of truth, and say all we have to say on a particular doctrine in one sermon.³

While the necessity and strength of this assumption appear self-evident and guard one from fanciful or dismissive exegesis, a warning must also be given. Concentration on the uniqueness of each text must not make us “hyper-textual” so that we miss its meaning by failing to integrate it with the whole message. Uniqueness must not drive us to diminish the internal doctrinal coherence of Scripture. This leads to our next point.

Doctrinal Preaching takes seriously the historic Christian witness to distinctive Christian truth expressed in the confessions. Confessions are not inspired, but they offer several advantages to the biblically-oriented doctrinal preacher. They stand as a witness to the coherence that historic Christianity has seen in Scripture. One can organize from a large number of literary styles in Scripture a full-orbed biblical presentation on creation, sin, providence, holiness, justification, economics, sexuality and a continually expanding number of topics. These topics thus organized as discreet discussions can help in the interpretation of difficult passages. For biblical interpretation, confessions provide the most prominent body of exegetical options on major biblical teachings.

Another helpful aspect of confessional awareness in doctrinal preaching is the development of fullness in instruction. One should regularly read through historic confessional statements and ask, “Has my preaching over the past year given attention to the full range of biblical doctrine?” Even a perusal of the *Abstract of Principles*, the confession that governs the teaching of both Southern and Southeastern Baptist Seminaries, would discipline a person in the balance of the topics he must be sure regularly to inculcate from the pulpit. Twenty topics, each of which suggest several others, include the Scriptures, God, the Trinity, Providence, Election, the Fall of Man, the Mediator, Regeneration, Repentance, Faith, Justification, Sanctification, Perseverance of the Saints, the Church, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the Lord’s Day, Liberty of Conscience, the Resurrection and the Judgment. *The Second London Confession* contains thirty-two articles, each with several highly suggestive paragraphs. A year’s time should see at least some teaching done from the pulpit on each of these important ideas given us by divine revelation in the merciful redemptive purpose of God.

Doctrinal Preaching is always Christological. The flow of history as revealed to us in Scripture is inextricably the working out of redemptive history. All of this is

summed up in Christ (Ephesians 1:10). God judges all nations, He has committed all judgment to the Son, and this judgment arises from the implications involved in the incarnation of the Son of God as Son of Man for the saving of a people (John 5:19–30). The Christian minister can speak of no issue in culture without seeing it in terms of Christ's Lordship and His redemptive manifestation of divine righteousness.

Not only should history and contemporary culture be seen through Christological eyes, but the whole Bible should be seen this way. The Father and the Spirit want us to be driven to Christ as we read and consider every part of the Bible. The Father was pleased to have all fullness dwell in Him and the Spirit does all of His work to glorify Christ. Christ saw all the Scriptures of the Old Testament as pointing to Him, specifically the entering into glory as a result of His redemptive suffering, and He taught His disciples to see it in this way (Luke 24:25–27). His Spirit still teaches those that obtain the new birth this principle of biblical interpretation (2 Corinthians 3:14–18).

Among many others who give beautiful expression to this truth, John Flavel's first sermon in *The Fountain of Life* established the principle in a comprehensive and undeniable way. Knowledge of Christ is "the very marrow and kernel of all the scriptures; the scope and centre [sic] of all divine revelations; both Testaments meet in Christ." Also, knowledge of Christ is "fundamental" to all graces, duties, comforts, and happiness. Ministers in particular, who have a calling vitally connected to Christ, must "present him in all his attractive excellencies, that all hearts may be ravished with his beauty, and charmed into his arms by love."⁴

Doctrinal preaching always puts the temporal in subjection to the eternal. Many times ministers of the gospel are tempted by their own immediate observations and even encouraged by formal prescription to gain a hearing by entering the conscience of their audience through a door of temporal interest. Such an approach determines that only by the greatest difficulty, if ever, can one rise above the self-interest inflamed by the preacher's starting point. From the beginning a preacher dooms his sermon to the status of remedial psychology and Jesus to the status of a guarantor of present security and happiness.

The entire story line of Scripture presents the problem of sin and resultant eternal condemnation as the ever-present burden of fallen man. Nothing can transcend the horror of the condemning wrath that from the moment of conception hangs over the head of every son of Adam. No economic strain, no domestic difficulty, no battle with depression, no awkwardness in coping with co-workers, all issues that plague the day by day lives of all people, matches the wrath of the great abyss into which the ungodly will be cast.

The remedy for our problem as the Bible reveals it is nothing less than the sacrificial death of God's own eternal Son. Such a solution for any problem less than that of cursedness would be grossly disproportionate to the crime and unworthy of a God of justice. But since the problem is eternal in dimension the solution must be commensurate, infinite and eternal in excellence and moral status.

The approach of the preacher must be to lay out this eternal dimension of the divine/human interaction as foremost in his ministry of proclamation. The paradigm of felt needs can never replace the biblically revealed construct of Law/Gospel. In light of trespasses and reconciliation Paul summarizes his task as the “ministry of reconciliation,” his message as “the word of reconciliation,” and his only admonition as “Be ye reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:18–20). His hearers must know that they are to labor, not for the bread that perishes, but for that that endures to eternal life. Christians are to receive the doctrine that all troubles of this life are but light and momentary affliction when put in view of the eternal weight of glory that shall be ours. We should not place our concern on things seen; they are temporal. We look at the things not seen for they are eternal.

Conclusion

Richard Furman, revered South Carolina Baptist, denominational statesman, promoter of education, incomparable pastor, and consummate preacher set forth the ministers task in preaching—and preaching to him meant the exposition of doctrine—as the preeminent task of the gospel minister. He described it in a sermon on the *Constitution and Order of the Christian Church*. His words serve as an apt conclusion to the dominant concern of this article.

In preaching, they are to be instant in improving all suitable opportunities, as well those which may be out of the ordinary. . . . ever actuated with a holy fervor, as speaking in the cause of God, and to immortal creatures, on the subject of their everlasting interests: that they may pluck the sinner, as a “brand out of the burning;” . . . So that it may be done . . . as his great work, in which he must, as it were, send forth all his soul. . . . Here again, he must distinguish between the law and gospel; and between the characters of men, as saints or sinners; must point out the ruined and guilty state of all, by nature, under the curse of a broken law; sound as it were, Mount Sinai’s thunder in the sinners ear; present the flaming mountain to his eye; and thus produce the awful evidence, to that momentous truth, “that by the deeds of the law, shall not flesh living be justified.” To the humbled sinner, and believing soul, he must describe Jesus, as “the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world;” As the only, the almighty, and the willing savior. He must describe him, in his person, his offices, his works of love and grace, his bleeding passion, and his triumphant state. He must open, as it were, Immanuel’s heart, in the description of divine compassion, and publish the gracious invitations of the gospel, to perishing and heavy-laden souls; must shew the abundant grace contained in the promises, and the foundation on which faith may rest, in the faithfulness, infinite goodness, sovereign mercy, and unchangeable purpose of the promiser. To him belongs the important

work of drawing aside the veil of time, and opening the awful scenes of eternity, on his hearers' minds; of describing the joys of paradise; and the terrors of the infernal world. To present man with the humbling scenes of his mortality; and erect the throne of decisive judgments in his mental view.⁵ ☞

Notes:

¹ John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982 [second reprint]), 1:74.

² Edward Veal "What is the Danger of a Death-bed Repentance?" in *Puritan Sermons 1659–1689 being the Morning Exercises at Crilpplegate, etc.* 6 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1981), 4:347.

³ Francis Wayland, *The Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* in "The Bunyan Library" vol. 1, ed. John Howard Hinton (London: J. Heaton & Son, 1861), 239–45.

⁴ Flavel, 1:34–40.

⁵ Richard Furman, *The Constitution and Order of the Christian Church* (Charleston: Markland & McIver, 1791), 26, 27.

Book Review

Geoffrey Thomas. *Preaching: The Man, the Message and the Method*. Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 2001. 73 pages.

Reviewed by Michael G. McKelvey

While many contemporary books on preaching focus on the style and mechanics of a sermon, very few actually look beyond the practical aspects of this subject in order to consider the preacher and his preaching. Surely, the practical features of preaching are important matters for study and development, but the primary concern in preaching must be the biblical understanding of the preacher himself and his function.

At the heart of this office, there is a man who is called by God, through the church, for the task of proclaiming a specific message in a particular way. In *Preaching: The Man, the Message and the Method*, Geoff Thomas discusses the subject of preaching in a manner that is not often found in other modern-day writings. Originally given as lectures to students at Reformed Theological Seminary, Thomas is upfront and honest about what it takes to serve the church of Christ in the capacity of preacher. He examines each area of preaching (the man, the

message, and the method) in a way that leaves the reader looking at his own heart before God, rather than seeking how to implement the newest concept on the homiletical scene.

In the first chapter, Thomas considers the prospect of full-time gospel ministry from various angles, covering the general aspects of the ministry. These aspects range from the privilege of engaging in this service to the benefits of committing one's self to long-term labor in a specific community. One of the highlights of the ministerial calling mentioned in this chapter is that the richness of the pastor's work cannot be compared to other forms of ministry. Whether para-church work, itinerant preaching, or various teaching opportunities, none of these can be related to the full-time office of pastor. They are very fluid, and do not necessarily involve day to day ministry with the same people, often times for much of their lives. For example, one of the benefits of the pastorate (particularly long-term) is that "preachers become rich in their knowledge of the ways of God with man, and of human nature" (11). This places them in a unique position for the shepherding of God's people that is not found in any other vocation. Also, Thomas indicates that the man who is involved in this ministry must be one who serves the Lord "for no reward other than the immense privilege of having so great a Master as our Christ" (12). It is important for us to see that the life of the preacher must reflect this distinctive. The work of the ministry deals with the heart in such a way that it causes the preacher to grow in his love of Christ and thankfulness for God's grace. Because of this, his desire to serve in this capacity should be void of any selfish ambition, and it must be rooted in a love for the Savior.

The main concern of Chapter 2 ("The Man") is the issue of the preacher and his heart, as he submits to Christ in his life and office. At the beginning, Thomas provides a definition of preaching: "Preaching is Omnipotence regenerating, instructing, convicting and redeeming sinners that they may love God and be like him. In other words, preaching is a saving and sanctifying act of God" (22). This statement reveals Thomas' conviction that preaching is a divine act in all of its faculties, from the beginning to the end. After providing that definition, he separates this chapter into two sections that examine, first, the call to the ministry and, second, the continuance in it. In the call to preaching, there needs to be a self-evaluation that involves five key areas: vitality, rationality, intellectual ability, mood and spirituality. So by this evaluation, "...the sense of call becomes an educated, an informed, and thus a conscientious human assessment. We make it about ourselves in self-examination, and other Christians make it about us" (26). Having evaluated one's inward sense of calling, Thomas emphasizes that no one is truly "called" until Christ calls them through a local church, "because, ultimately, God's call is mediated to you through his people" (26). This conclusion shows his unwavering commitment to preaching being a divine act, even in the call. Following this, in the continuation of the pastorate, it is the Word of God that establishes churches, and the Word must, therefore, be applied not only to the congregation, but to the heart of the preacher as well. In the light of this, Thomas looks at the necessity of the preacher submitting to the Word, not in a merely intellectual

manner, but whole-heartedly. A statement on the final page of the chapter conveys his main point of this section. Thomas says, “The trend of the day has a tendency to lose sight of the man or sink the man in the plan or organisation. God’s plan is to make much of the man, far more of him than anything else. Men are God’s great method. The church is looking for better methods, God is looking for better men” (37).

As a man who is submitted to Christ, the preacher has a message of good news for everyone. However, it is not simply that he has a message of good news, but that he is gripped by that message. In Chapter 3, Thomas explains that because the preacher’s message is directly relevant to everyone who hears him, he must be consumed with what he is preaching. According to Thomas, this message consists of two things. First, it is the gospel of God’s grace, i.e. grace that has a purpose, is invincible and redeems. Secondly, the message is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thomas says, “The good news is Jesus Christ, in the glory of his person and the perfection of his finished work” (49). In other words, our message is a “message of grace, and it is centred upon the Lord Jesus Christ” (54). Thomas’ emphasis on the centrality of Christ in preaching is very refreshing. There is much discussion on Christ-centered preaching today, but very few books get to the crux of the matter. To be a Christ-centered preacher, it is essential for the preacher to be consumed with Christ Himself, not just doctrines about Him. A genuine love for the Lord Jesus is needed in the heart of the preacher before he can preach this message of God’s grace, which is revealed in Christ. Thomas’ effort to magnify the centrality of Christ in the message of preaching is greatly appreciated.

Regarding “the method” of preaching (Chapter 4), Thomas supplies “a seven-fold beginners’ *methodology* of the true work of the ministry.” The methodology is as follows:

- 1) The work of the ministry will only be achieved by unfeigned belief in truthfulness of the Bible.
- 2) The work of the ministry will only be achieved by enduring tough times.
- 3) The work of the ministry will only be achieved by toil.
- 4) The work of the ministry will only be achieved by dependence upon the Holy Spirit.
- 5) The work of the ministry can only be achieved in the defense of the gospel.
- 6) The work of the ministry will only be achieved by discriminatory preaching.
- 7) The work of the ministry will only be achieved by applicatory preaching.

Thomas examines each of these elements and their necessity in the work of the pastorate. In a very engaging and illustrative style, he brings his readers into his own experience of the ministry, by honestly showing them the demands, heartaches, joys and challenges of being a minister of the gospel.

Finally, I cannot recommend this book too highly. Reflecting upon a course that I recently taught on preaching and my own seminary education as well, I am convinced that there was something missing in all of the assigned readings. That something is a book that deals with the preacher and his preaching in a way that goes to the heart of the issue: his love for Christ, commitment to Him and His church, and attitude toward the ministry and persevering in it. This book addresses these things in one way or another, and confronts the reader with the great grace of God as the source for being a preacher of the gospel. It is my hope that many pastors and students will take the time to read this book and examine themselves as they consider the man, the message, and the method of preaching. ☺

Letters

Dear Founders:

Thank you so much for your wonderful publication. Your articles are greatly edifying and your ministry desperately necessary in a “dry and thirsty land where no water is.” As a servant of the Word who longs to see reformation in our Southern Baptist churches, my prayers are with you. Keep up the good work!

P.S. The Blog is outstanding as well!

Soli Deo Gloria!

P. G.

Dr. Puls,

... I have enjoyed taking classes over the past two semesters. I intend on making full use of the Study Center. It is literally an answer to prayer. Due to family and life commitments, I have never been able to attend seminary as a full time student. The Study Center gives me access to the teachings of biblically sound, seasoned ministers under the tutelage of my local pastor. It is wonderful. In your response please provide information concerning how I can make a donation to provide scholarships for other students or to enhance the ministry of the Study Center. May God continue to richly bless you.

D. T., via email

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