
THE FUTURE OF EXPOSITORY PREACHING

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What do soldiers talk about *before* battle? A moviemaker answers with the portrayal of a private who on the eve of D-Day reminisces about his time at home: "Sometimes when my mother would come in to wake me up in the morning and tell me that she loved me, I would pretend that I was asleep and didn't hear her." Then after a long pause, he adds, "I don't know why I did that." What comes from the lips of soldiers *after* battle? Shelby Foote's account of the Civil War records, "As they lay wounded and dying on the field of battle, they cry out for water and their mothers." The message is simple: We may not appreciate what is most dear to us until we are desperate. This is true of mothers and, I will contend in this message, it is also true of expository preaching.

The ethic of expository preaching is plain: Because we believe that the power of spiritual transformation resides in the Word of God, the goal of the preacher is to say what God says. Expository preaching that solemnly commits the preacher to make the meaning of the passage the message of the sermon is the preaching method that most dependably achieves this aim. Yet, we must confess that we can tire of the apron strings of such a method and long for approaches more imaginative, communicative and seemingly relevant. We long to fly to more exotic destinations, but may in the heat of a culture war discover that there's no place like home.

What I intend to contend is that expository preaching, like the homes of our youth, may occasionally need some remodeling, but there is still no place like home for the restoration and nurture of the spirit. Mom and apple pie do not seem so bad when you are at war, and neither does expository preaching in the present cultural battle for the soul. To discern why we still need some home cookin' we need first to discern what some of the trends are in the world of pulpit feeding, then to understand what gives us a taste for it and, finally, determine what can spice up what is dear to us without dishing out something no different than what the rest of the world offers.

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PRESENT TRAJECTORIES

Waning of Narrative Emphases

At the same moment that our culture is deepening its appreciation of story forms of communication, the homiletics world—particularly the evangelical homiletics world—is showing increasing caution toward the dominant use of story in preaching. The narrative revolution that produced the “New Homiletic” and enveloped mainline preaching over the last three decades is being examined with greater perceptiveness by the rising generation of Bible-believing preachers and scholars. This increasing caution is not because any of us doubts the power of story to hold attention and touch the heart (aspects of communication that expository preaching—at least in stereotype—is notoriously weak in producing). Rather, our increasing wariness is a result of the growing awareness of the philosophical soil from which narrative models have sprung.

The philosophical ground from which modern narrative theory sprouts presumes that propositional truth is not transcendent or transferable.¹ Thought rooted in this soil presupposes that all truth is relative, personal and existentially related to one’s own circumstances. Thus, it is argued that no one can really or fully communicate transcendent ideas; we are all limited by our own subjectivity. This reasoning leads to the conclusion that if all we are able to contemplate is personal truth, the only way that we can mutually share any perspective that is true to us is through a shared experience with others. The conclusion is that a truth perspective can be communicated only by a mutually shared experience.

As a result of these presuppositions, secular speech theorists, and liberal theologians following their lead, have resorted to using narrative as a means of creating shared experiences in communication events such as preaching. The narrative pioneers in the field of homiletics bought the argument that no authoritative propositions could be culturally transcendent or universally meaningful for persons from diverse life contexts. These late-twentieth-century preaching trailblazers portrayed stories as knights on white chargers that would rescue preaching, not

¹By “propositional truth” I mean statements of culturally transcendent principles for life and godliness that are normative, communicable and comprehensible for all who would be obedient to Christ according to Scripture. For a fuller discussion of the philosophical soil from which narrative homiletics spring, see the author’s *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 177-92; and chapter 6 in the forthcoming second edition of *Christ-centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005).

merely from congregational inattention and not merely from irrelevance, but from actual incomprehensibility.

What Bible-believing preachers are now recognizing, as they reflect more on the narrative preaching movement, is that while stories certainly garner attention and can use shared experience powerfully to communicate, narratives are not the only way humans can or should communicate. The notion that we cannot understand or share propositional truth is simply not the perspective of the writers of the Bible or the experience of twenty centuries of biblical preachers following them.

Scripture presents its truth in propositions as well as in narratives because the Bible proclaims that believers are made in the image of God and are indwelt by his Spirit—the same Spirit who inspired his Word. Those made in the image of God already share a context by which to have a mutual understanding of his world and his Word. We certainly acknowledge:

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:14).

Still, we contend, because the Bible does, that those indwelt by the Holy Spirit have their minds renewed so that they can understand the spiritual truths of his Word and perceive their world accordingly (1 Cor 2:9-13, 16; 2 Cor 2:13-18). The “genius of Scripture” is its use of narrative to give propositions culturally transcendent contexts while synergistically using propositions to give meaning to the narratives. This meaning is not merely existential but rather eternal, and it is not incomprehensible but rather communicated to hearts indwelt by the same Spirit who inspired it.²

These spiritual truths do not disregard the power of story, but they do challenge the presuppositions that would make its use exclusive or preeminent in preaching. Much of what the modern theorists have written about the techniques and effects of storytelling may be fruitfully used in the illustrative features of traditional expository sermons. Dispensing with stories in such sermons is both insensitive to culture and unbiblical in pattern, but dispensing with propositional truth is even more dangerous to biblical faith. Expository preaching will persist because propositional truth does.

Rekindling of Expository Emphases with Communication Experimentation

Replacing the narrative tide is a new wave of advocates for expository methods. With a wink to Mark Twain, we can safely report that the

²Chapell, *Using Illustrations*, 186–87.

death of expository preaching was greatly exaggerated. As any scan of recent textbooks from evangelical publishers will attest, expository preaching is again the rage.³ These recent books are only adding to the healthy, ongoing sales of established expository advocates such as Haddon Robinson, Sidney Greidanus, Charles Koller, Stephen Olford, Jay Adams, Jerry Vines and others. Yet, even these significant homiletics texts may not be the best indication of the kind of preaching most prevalent among North America's evangelicals. The greatest indicator of the strength of our commitment to expository preaching is the remarkably consistent sale of the hosts of exegetical tools and commentaries. Our commitment to saying what the text says is strong and encouraging.

By citing this continuing emphasis on expository methods I do not mean to imply that our methods are, or should be, entirely unchanged in this new millennium. The expository method as we practice it (codified by John Broadus 150 years ago) remains relatively new in the history of preaching. We ought not to think that we have nothing new to learn about this approach or other approaches to proclaiming the truths of God's eternal Word.

Contemporary advocates of expository methods are profitably employing the insights of narrative theology in the way that illustrations are used and in the way that sermons are structured to reflect more closely the narrative form of many texts. The Bible is three-quarters narrative (including historical accounts, parables and imagistic references) and the narrative theorists clearly have given us new tools to interpret and relate this biblical material. What keeps adaptations of these narrative insights expository (and biblical) is the preacher's commitment to communicate the truths of the text accurately and comprehensively with the presupposition that these truths are normative and transcendent. Thus, an expositor may with biblical integrity substitute a homiletical "move" for a traditional main point, or follow an inductive order to a propositional conclusion, or create a personal address to communicate a biblical character's perspective. Still, the

³Michael Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002); Al Mohler, Jr. et al., *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, ed. John Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002); Steven J. Lawson, *Famine in the Land: A Passionate Call for Expository Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2003); Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons* (1995; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001); Haddon Robinson and Torrey Robinson, *It's All How You Tell It: Preaching First-Person Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003); Jim Shaddix, *The Passion-Driven Sermon* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003); Hershael W. York and Bert Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance: A Solid and Enduring Approach to Engaging Exposition* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003).

emphasis is on what the biblical *author* means to say, not on what the biblical *reader* determines the text to mean.

Expository preachers are also using new insights of public address theory (putting much more emphasis on conversation and identification) and technology (valuing visualization and multi-media impressions). These expositors may not seem to echo the oratorical sounds of a previous generation of biblical preachers, but the ethic is the same: Say what the text says! The true expositor will always have the goal of opening his Bible before a congregation and (even if the text is in PowerPoint) saying, "I will explain to you what this text means and how it applies to your life based on the author's intent as determined by the text's language, culture, genre and context."

Questing for Certitude (Neo-Conservatism)

We must confess that this new emphasis on expository methods is a result of various cultural forces as well as of biblical commitments. We can be cautiously thankful for some of these cultural influences, knowing that the societal waves can shift again. One societal wave that is shifting, to the benefit of the Gospel, relates to our two-decade-old concern about alternative spiritualities. The popular *pursuit of spirituality* in unorthodox and eclectic religious forms has, for some, become a more focused *search for certitude*.

The intellectually honest know that all forms of religion cannot be compatible or interchangeable. This honesty is leading to some re-investigation and revalidation of historic Christianity. In addition, rapid changes in popular culture, national economics, moral values, church traditions, political alliances, educational levels and global stability have created a reflex neo-Conservatism. Many in our churches demand expository preaching simply because it reminds them of an older and simpler church world. Such motives, however, if they are not carefully addressed, will ultimately lead to mere cultural traditionalism rather than the spiritual transformation that expository preaching seeks.

We should not minimize the opportunities for the Gospel made available by our society's search for anchors amidst the waves of a cultural storm. Still, to navigate the storm we must recognize that the church is herself being divided by the waves' effects. At the same moment that some in the evangelical church are addressing the storm by lowering the barriers between church and world (with greater informality and more "accessible" worship forms), others in the evangelical world are questioning, "Why bother to be a church if it doesn't seem like church?" Not just the older, but also "The Younger

Evangelicals⁴ are seeking solace and certitude in the ancient forms of worship and communication.

The impulse to lower barriers, as seen in the Willow Creek, Calvary Chapel, Vineyard and “Purpose Driven...” movements, may soon reach its apex—and may already have done so. At the same time, the urge to “make church be church” is creating new interest in formal liturgy and swelling the ranks of traditional churches (including many Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Reformed and Episcopal communions). This urge to go “backwards into the future” is also creating new commitments to ancient forms in traditionally informal denominations (Baptist, Methodist and major African-American denominations).

Both impulses—to reach the culture *and* to keep from being swept along by it—have biblical warrant. What will determine the appropriateness of choices made in each movement will be whether leadership will be able to resist choices based merely on cultural currents or cultural reactions and instead make decisions based on biblical authority. Expository preaching that instructs the congregation according to the authority of the Word of God is necessary in each setting to chart a biblical course. Many strong expositors serve faithfully amidst these countercurrents, and these preachers have increasing obligations to lead by the Word.

Seeking Faith in Community

One of the ways in which we see expository preaching being led by cultural forces while simultaneously challenging them relates to the social content of the message coming from our pulpits. Expository sermons have historically been predominant in churches that were suspicious of too much intermingling of any social agenda with gospel priorities. The evangelical church was late to the Civil Rights movement, a secondary voice to Roman Catholicism in sanctity of life efforts and largely identified with *laissez faire* republicanism in American politics.

Something is happening in the area of expository preaching that fits none of these previous stereotypes. Preachers are seeing in the text a certain correction to the North American brand of evangelicalism that has made a “personal relationship with Jesus” not so much a vital union with the living God, as just another self-enrichment plan for those in a me-first culture. Even in this generation of seminary students, the notion that ministry is about sacrifice, mission and leadership for the sake of the body of Christ is a difficult concept for those nurtured on the idea that faith is all about “Jesus and me.” Countering the self-indulgent

⁴See Robert Webber’s important book by this title, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002).

individualism of modern evangelicalism are several new emphases and cultural currents:

- Word *and* deed ministry in the local church for evangelistic outreach, community renewal and congregational credibility and retention (especially among the young);
- The New Perspective on Paul that (in my view) overcorrects evangelical individualism by seeming to make personal obligations to a faith community the primary message of the New Testament;
- New emphases in the worship wars about the importance of the sacraments as covenantal identification with the Christian community;
- Counter-cultural movements to stem cultural erosion and moral corruption through family cohesion maintained in tight-knit church, school and political communities;
- Advances in technology, travel, housing, workplace and sports making it ever more plain that antipathies based on race, ethnicity and nation are clearly counter to the New Testament emphasis on the oneness of the Christian community in Christ;
- Greater influence of Asian and African Christianity on North American evangelicalism, helping to remove our blinders regarding our individualized faith as a consequence of their cultural emphases on the primacy of the good of the community.

The key word in each of these characterizations is “community.” I cannot evaluate each emphasis in this forum, but rather point out that as a collection, these influences are causing evangelicals to see in Scripture an emphasis on community that is both challenging and enriching our traditional messages about individual commitment to Christ. A generation ago Francis Schaeffer warned that the evangelical church was contributing to the American mis-definition of fulfillment: merely finding “personal peace and affluence.” Expository preaching that deals with the text in its community context is helping the evangelical church to think biblically about such matters and recommitting a generation to the biblical necessity of being salt and light in society in addition to being personally secure.

Exploration of Application Issues

How we will apply Scripture to our present situation in order to be salt and light remains a hot topic in adult Sunday schools but a great void in the homiletics literature. Once application was easy. Everyone knew the uniform that evangelicals were supposed to wear: do not smoke or drink or chew; do not see bad movies; and do not cuss when the preacher is around. Virtually any biblical text could be exegeted to add threads to this uniform of evangelical/fundamentalist identification. Of course, for reasons both good and bad, that uniform is now largely considered out

of fashion. Survey after survey tells us that the life patterns of evangelicals on matters as varied as marriage, entertainment, alcohol and drug use, abortion and charitable giving vary little from the secular culture. The individualism that we were inadvertently promoting by emphasizing faith as a path to personal fulfillment has come home to roost as mere paganism among our people.

We know how to preach salvation by faith, but we have not yet determined how to replace false legalisms with true piety. Young and old are more schooled in popular culture than biblical thought—that is evident not only in our congregants' lifestyles, but also in their shocking lack of biblical knowledge. Yet, before we blame others for not applying the Scriptures well, we must confess that even among conservative church leaders there is little consensus regarding such culture-forming issues as economics, government, education, poverty and war. The cold wash of this culture's realities are making it startlingly evident that it was far easier to talk about the uniform than it is to fight the spiritual war of the soul in today's society.

We are beginning to think afresh about how exposition and application relate to these cultural battles for the soul. There is a healthy trickle of recent articles and books on how to do exegetically sound application.⁵ Still, much work remains to be done in order for expository preaching to move from merely creating weekly to-do lists based on our own traditions and really identifying how biblical truth applies to life's struggles. I see new hope for preaching in this fledgling movement toward applying Scripture to contemporary life. The movement is indicative of a larger shift in the overall homiletical discussion. For the last thirty years our primary concern has been *how* we communicate. Now we are talking more and more about *what* we communicate—this has always been the preeminent question of every era when faithful preaching has flourished.

Flowering of Redemptive Exposition

Concern for content is not only reinvigorating expository preaching, it is also driving us to reconsider what rules the content of our messages. Always the text rules in expository preaching. This is not a new focus. What is new, or at least is being emphasized with greater vigor, is the

⁵John Carrick, *The Imperative of Preaching: A Theology of Sacred Rhetoric* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2002); Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996) and *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001); Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives*; Haddon Robinson, "The Heresy of Application," *Leadership Journal*, 18/4 (Fall 1997): 24ff.; York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance: A Solid and Enduring Approach to Engaging Exposition*.

Word in the text. By this I do not mean the words of the text, but the divine *Logos* as he is made known in every properly interpreted passage of Scripture. Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the Author and Finisher of our faith. He is the culminating message of Scripture, but the word about this Eternal Word is also woven throughout the biblical text. Either by *prediction, preparation, reflection* or *result* the redemptive message of God's provision radiates throughout the Bible, and no portion of it can be properly expounded without disclosing its relationship to his redemptive nature and work.⁶

Disclosing this relationship does *not* require imaginative or allegorical mention of some specific in Christ's life, but rather insists on exegetical and contextual explanation of how the text furthers the covenant people's understanding of his person and work. The term "Christ-centered" is synecdoche for the matrix of ways in which God discloses his redeeming nature and work, including the revelation of false hopes (dead ends) and forward hints (bridges) that makes his people long for, recognize and worship their Redeemer. This disclosure may come from 1) the role of the text (its events and persons) in redemptive history, 2) the redemptive instruction doctrinally expressed in the passage, and/or 3) the way that God relationally interacts with and provides for his people.

When the risen Lord walks with his unknowing disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke tells us, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he [i.e., Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). This is a remarkable statement for those of us who are committed to an expository method. When Jesus expounds the Bible, he says that it is all about him (cf. Jn 5:39, 46). The apostles say the same (Jn 1:45; Acts 10:43; Rom 3:21). Thus, if we interpret any portion without relating it to him, we fail to say the very thing that he and his apostles say it is about. Paul followed this ethic, writing to the Corinthians, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Of course, Paul spoke about more subjects than the atonement, but he placed them all in the context of their relation to the Redeemer. Wisdom, relationships and worship all get their bearings from the message of the Christ who has become for us wisdom from God, our righteousness, holiness and redemption (1 Cor 1:30). In him all things hold together (Col 1:17). Expository preaching that would say what God says expounds Christ from all the Scriptures because he says and they say that he is there.

⁶See the author's *Christ-centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 275-86.

The trend toward more Christ-centered messages in expository preaching certainly seems to be upon us. When *Christ-centered Preaching* was published ten years ago, I was launching my redemptive preaching canoe on a small stream fed by a few headwaters—the likes of Geerhardus Vos, Edmund Clowney and John Sanderson. But over the last decade, and especially in the last five years, the trickle of materials advocating the necessity of a redemptive theological interpretation of Scripture has become a torrent.⁷ In addition, new homiletics texts that intend to be comprehensive approaches to preaching almost without exception now contain a requisite section on redemptive interpretation. And as I have had the privilege of recently writing a second edition of *Christ-centered Preaching* that will be published next year, the encouragement of homiletics colleagues has not been to temper this emphasis but to explain it more. This Christocentric preaching trend seems to have sufficient momentum to be around for a while.

FUTURE HOPES

The hope that I have for expository, Christ-centered preaching may, perhaps, best be discerned by considering the consequences of its absence. I do not mean to be exhaustive in this listing, but rather to hint at significant pressures that I believe will press us to keep preaching expositoryly in the future. Expository, Christ-centered preaching will be

⁷Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003) and *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988); Ian M. Duguid, *Hero of Heroes: Seeing Christ in the Beatitudes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001) and *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1999); Raymond B. Dillard, *Faith in the Face of Apostasy: The Gospel According to Elijah and Elisha* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1999); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1994) and *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2000); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997); Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1999) and *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991); C. Trimp, *Preaching and the History of Salvation: Continuing an Unfinished Discussion*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Scarsdale, NY: Westminster Discount Book Service, 1996); Gerard Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990); Michael J. Williams, *The Prophet and His Message: Reading Old Testament Prophecy Today* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003).

important for our future because without it we deny God's people Christ's light, voice, bread, body and heart.

The Purpose of Scripture (The Light of Christ)

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus. The Old Testament figures appear in order to indicate that Jesus is the culmination of their message and all that they represent. As Jesus tells his disciples elsewhere, "'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Lk 24:44-45). The expositor's goal is to *dianoigo* and *diermenuo* ("open" and "unfold") the meaning of the Scriptures. Since their culminating and comprehensive purpose is to reveal the glory of Christ's person and work, exposition cannot avoid him without abandoning Scripture's aim.

The intended purpose of all Scripture is further revealed by the simple reminder that all Scripture is God-breathed and given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit (1 Tm 3:16; 1 Pt 1:20-21). The Spirit's mission, Jesus tells us, is to testify of him (Jn 14:26; 15:26). Thus, if we are to say what the Scriptures say—Scriptures inspired by that same Spirit whose mission is to testify of Jesus—then we must preach Christ in all the Scriptures. The Spirit intends for us to see how he is testifying of Christ in all the Scriptures. We do not fully understand or rightly interpret the Bible if we do not see Christ as the obedient Adam, the faithful Israel, the just Judge, the true King, the fulfilling Prophet, the church's body and our ultimate Hope. With infinite wisdom the Spirit uses the Scriptures to show us many kinds of persons, events and revelations to illumine both dead-ends and bridges that will instruct us on our journey toward full understanding of the grace that is in Christ alone.

We must remember that the same Spirit that inspires the Scriptures resides in the believing heart. The regenerate are internally wired by the Spirit to receive the message of the Word he inspired. Expository preaching not only trusts this two-way circuitry, but also uses it to answer a world that says there can be no transcendent and transferable truth. Expository preachers have a future only because we depend upon this supernatural process that gives us and our people confidence that we can understand what the Bible communicates (1 Cor 2:9-14). At the same time, this circuitry that unites the mind of heaven and the heart of the believer warns us that a disconnect will occur if our message is not what the Spirit intends. He intends to communicate Christ; that is the Spirit's mission. Thus, only messages with the Savior's savor will have the taste of spiritual certitude for which our culture longs.

The Power of Faith

The ultimate consequence of not speaking in accord with the Spirit's message is denying the people of God not just the taste of certitude, but also the power of God. Without a Christ-centered message, the people of God are denied both the encouragement of his voice and the nourishment of his bread.

The Voice of Jesus

Augustine wrote long ago that when the Bible speaks, God speaks. Thus, when we explain what the Bible says, we communicate God's Word to his people. This is more than just a figure of speech. The Spirit that inspires Scripture only speaks what is given to him by the Son (Jn 16:13-15). Thus, when we are communicating what God says in his Word, we are communicating what the Son says through the Spirit. Expository preaching that says what God says is, thus, doing more than explaining what a passage of an ancient document means. Such preaching is yet presenting the voice of the Shepherd to his sheep. Luther said the church is God's "mouth house." The Second Helvetic Confession captures more, saying, "The preaching of the Word of God, is the Word of God." And John Calvin most boldly proclaims the implications, saying that God has so chosen to anoint the lips and tongue of the faithful proclaimers of his Word that, when they speak, "the voice of Jesus" comes out. Preaching that is true to the Christ-centered purposes of the Spirit yet makes the voice of the Savior present among his people.

The design of the Scripture is to perpetuate the voice of the Savior through the proclaimers of his Word. We are ambassadors for Christ, as though he were making his appeal through us (2 Cor 5:20). Such an understanding of the Christ-embodied nature of preaching does not deny the power of technological means of communication, but it cautions against trusting in any mechanism or media that distracts listeners from the ethos of the minister. When the truth of Christ is made incarnate by our teaching and our testimony, then the truth that is inscripturated in his Word becomes most audible to his people and most real to their hearts. However, when either teaching or testimony is void of a Christ-focus, then the voice of the Savior becomes distant. Expository preaching that unfolds the redemptive message of every passage maintains the voice of the Savior for the sake of both preacher and parishioner.

The Bread of Life

More than the voice of the Savior is made present by the faithful proclamation of the Word. Christ himself is present. The apostle Peter says, "You have been born again...through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pt 1:23). James says that the Father "chose to give us

birth through the word of truth" (Jas 1:18). The writer of Hebrews adds, "The word of God is living and active" (Heb 4:12). The written Word, the inscripturated Logos, is not just the message about Christ, it is also the ministry of Christ, who is present and active in the truth of his Word. The reason that he should be seen on every page is that he inhabits every line. He is the incarnate Word who comes to us in the inspired Word. To preach some portion of the Word without mention of him would be like speaking of one of my limbs as though it had nothing to do with my body. The written Word that we explain is the living Word that we proclaim. They are able to be separated conceptually, but they function as one. Christ comes to us and is present to us in the preaching that is true to his Word.

One reason that so much of our application has so little effect is that it is divorced from its source of spiritual power. "Apart from me [Christ] you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). Moral imperatives and personal correction that are not connected to Christ are spiritually futile even if they result in behavioral change. "I am crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life that I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). Christ is my life (Col 3:4). To seek to live a renewed life apart from him, without mention of him and/or by the brute effort of human will or strength, accomplishes nothing. As a regenerate being, I require Christ to be present in his Word for my life's sustenance. He is the Bread of my life—eternal sustenance and daily manna. I spiritually starve without him. Trying to feed others spiritually without him is like trying to raise healthy children on white bread without the vitamins infused. Such children may appear to be satisfied and may cry for more such bread, but they will not thrive and mature with such a diet.

The reason that we often do not see the reason for preaching Christ is that we have not fully perceived that all of our power to honor and worship him is through our union with him. If we more fully perceived that he is the only source of power for them that believe, then we would be less ready to proclaim or demand anything without him. Additionally, we would see that all Christ-centered preaching has a narrative, a story, for this story-thirsty culture. Jesus always comes to the rescue.⁸ It is his hand that reaches for us, his arm that carries us, his promise that comforts us, his Word that guides us, his life that substitutes for ours, his righteousness that fulfills ours, his home that awaits us and his kingdom that shall prevail.

⁸Tim Keller makes this important observation in "Post-Everythings," *By Faith* 1/1 (June/July, 2003): 29-30.

Beyond the limits of our understanding of *how* to preach Christ in all the Scriptures, the primary reason that we do not do so is that we have failed to understand *why* we must. We have not recognized how truly helpless we are apart from him. If we really understood that we have no life or strength or hope apart from him, then we could not perceive of preaching his commandments without summoning his aid; we would never pronounce his expectations without pleading for his grace. If we truly perceived the degree of our inability apart from him, we would not dare proclaim any portion of his Word without searching for him. To the extent that we do preach without resorting to him, we ultimately erode faith in him because we crack the door to the consideration, however slight, that we do not need him. Preaching obedience of any sort without mention of the one who enables our service communicates that there is strength apart from him. Additionally, such preaching implies that life can be lived without him so long as he stands to offer forgiveness when needed.

The Presence of Christ (The True Body)

If Jesus is not the life of our life, then he becomes but another in a long list of ethical instructors among the world's religions. We must sense this danger because the greatest danger to orthodox faith in this generation and in the foreseeable future is not inaccurate exegesis or inadequate application or ineffective communication or inaccessible worship. The greatest threat to orthodox faith in our lifetime is and will be religious pluralism: The presumption that because all truth is relative, all worship essentially the same God. The assumption of the equal value of all forms of spirituality is now so much a part of the DNA of our culture that we cannot examine the religious motives of terrorists or mention the events of Christ's crucifixion without being accused of bigotry.

We feed this pluralism whenever our preaching reduces Scripture to mere moral or behavioral instruction. Jay Adams boldly makes the following point: "If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the member of a Jewish synagogue or to a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it."⁹ It is certainly true that the moral maxims of the great religions of the world often parallel each other, but the Christian faith is unique in presenting a God who lived to provide the righteousness that we cannot earn, who died to provide the grace we do not deserve and who lives again in us that we may have his life now and eternally. We cannot be the body of Christ if he is not the source of our life.

⁹Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982), 147.

If we begin to perceive vast portions of the Bible to be void of the unique claims of our redeeming God and preach that way, then we will ultimately undermine the Christian faith of our listeners. On the basis of our preaching they will begin to trust and live a religion that is but a refinement of self rather than a union with Christ. They will join the rivers of humanity that are seeking fulfillment in what they do or gain, rather than in the eternal grace of their Savior. They will increasingly live in isolation from him, seeking his occasional grace only when they perceive themselves to have sufficiently crossed him or when they are in a crisis so large that they need his rescue or when they have so imbibed the world's definition of personal fulfillment that they need miracles of prosperity to make them happy. Those who express such faith will not see all of their lives as dependent on the Savior's life in them because we will not have preached all of the Scriptures as a revelation of their need of him for every breath. Other pursuits and other religions will look acceptable, even attractive, because they seem so to coincide with the Christless religion of self-improvement that we inadvertently preach if we do not proclaim the message of the redeeming God who unwaveringly reveals his grace throughout the Bible.

Without the unique claims of Christ pervading our preaching, the church that is his body ceases to have meaning for his people. On National Public Radio this past week, I listened to an author describe an evangelical Presbyterian who read her horoscope when she got up, practiced Tai Chi before breakfast, wore a crystal necklace to work and did yoga exercises at night without perceiving any particular tension in her practices. "Of course," said the author, "this is just a caricature." Replied the interviewer, "I don't think it's a caricature; I think that I'm married to that person." Preaching that is not Christ-centered ultimately promotes a faith that is not of Christ, even if it thinks of itself as Christian. The consequence is syncretism and the ultimate dissolution of the church.

The Compulsions of Love (The Heart of Christ)

The danger of not discovering or proclaiming the union with Christ that is our only hope in life and in death is not merely that we will lose appreciation for the uniqueness of our faith; we will also lose the compulsions of it. If Christ is not more beautiful to us than anything—more precious than gold, more fulfilling than success, more lovely than life itself—then his absence in others' lives does not seriously disturb us. Only when we discover how profound is the goodness of life in him do we truly grieve for those who do not have his blessing in their life. Without a Christ-centered faith we lose our love for the lost and our concern for the destitute. But when his heartbeat is our heartbeat, when his life is our life, and when we cannot consider any matter, any text, any

behavior, any instruction as isolation from him, then his grace and mercy priorities naturally (supernaturally) become our own.

Seeing and preaching the grace of God in all Scripture creates concern among some that Christ-centered preaching will lead to a redundant message or to an antinomian tendency. The root of this well-intended concern is that if we consistently resort to the message of grace then we will unfairly compress the scope of Scripture and exclude its imperatives. However, a redemptive perspective informed by, and formed by, the specific details of each text in its context discloses the many ways in which God consistently provides for his people and gives proper understanding and motivation for a variety of imperatives in Scripture. Grace is license only as the world defines grace. The grace of the Bible teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions because it stimulates love for God that is the foundation of all true obedience (Titus 2:12-14). Jesus said that if we love him, we will keep his commands (Jn 14:15). Thus, consistent adulation of the mercy of God in Christ is preaching's most powerful mechanism to stimulate holiness and mission. Ultimately believers will and can only do what their hearts most desire to do. When love for Christ fills our hearts, then his heart becomes ours. Preaching that discloses the redemptive heart in all of Scripture most adequately expounds and fulfills its divine goals.

The answer to the evangelical individualism that makes us the focus of our spirituality, that makes the distinctives of our faith less valuable to us and that makes the plight of the lost and hurting less concerning to us is Christ in us. The goal of expository preaching that has a future is to preach him – regularly, pervasively, truly – from all the Scriptures. He is there. When we preach no text in isolation from him, our people will not consider how they may live apart from him. When they see that by his grace they live and move and have their being, love for him will empower them. He will be their life, and his priorities will be their heart, because we will have taught them from all the Scriptures that he is their all in all.