

Preaching Christ—Always

Gary T. Waldecker

Christ-Centered Sermons

According to Scripture every sermon should be Christ-centered. We should always “preach Christ,” no matter what part of Scripture is used. In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul says that the message he preaches is “Christ crucified.” Later he says, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”¹

Paul was not saying that this just happened to be the theme of his message when he was in Corinth. His point is that this is the message he always preaches. This is evident from the reasons he gives for focusing his message on Christ: he is the power and wisdom of God.² Paul preached Christ so that their faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.³ If you don’t preach Christ crucified, you will end up pointing people to “men’s wisdom.”

Some have criticized this insistence on always preaching “Christ-centered” sermons as being reductionistic. Not every passage mentions Christ, they say, so just preach what the passage says. If you import Christ into passages that don’t mention him, you may end up missing the real meaning of the passage. Preaching Christ, however, is something different than simply mentioning his name or artificially adding aspects of the story of Christ’s life, death and resurrection to the Old Testament passage. Preaching Christ correctly is not reducing the Old Testament to the New or otherwise stripping a passage of its unique message.

Christ is the Center of God’s Plan and Revelation

While it’s true that not every passage mentions Christ specifically, and we don’t want to import him artificially into a passage and thus miss the central unique focus of the passage, it’s also true that Christ is presented in Scripture as the center of God’s plan and revelation. God’s plan was to “bring all things in heaven and on earth under one head, even Christ.”⁴ Jesus is the final and clearest Word of God.⁵

¹ 1 Corinthians 2:2. See also 2 Timothy 2:8 where the gospel for which he is in chains is described as “Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.” See also 1 Corinthians 15:1-5.

² 1 Corinthians 1:24

³ 1 Corinthians 2:5

⁴ Ephesians 1:10

⁵ John 1:1, Hebrews 1:1-3

Since Christ is the center of God’s plan, all of history has meaning only in relation to him and his coming. Since Christ is the center of God’s revelation, the true meaning of all Scripture—every passage—can be discerned only in relation to him. We should look carefully at the words of every passage and its contexts, and we should stick closely to those words. This helps us avoid imposing our own interpretations on Scripture. But we have not interpreted a passage properly if we don’t know how it relates to Christ. He is the ultimate paradigm through which Scripture should be interpreted.⁶

To the Jewish leaders who refused to believe in him Jesus said, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”⁷ In Luke 24 Jesus makes it clear to his disciples that the whole Old Testament⁸ points to and is fulfilled in the Christ. This is how he sums up

“what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.” Luke 24:46-47

Christ the Hero of the Story

Another way of putting this is to say that Christ is the central figure and hero of the story of the Bible. Because of this, every passage should be interpreted in relation to the person and work of Christ. When we read a chapter of a novel, for example, it only makes sense as we relate it to the whole story and its central figure(s).

In other words, every passage should be interpreted from a certain point of view. I suggest there are only two options. The first is that we preach in such a way that *we* are the hero, and Jesus is the one who helps us be the hero: he’s the Great Supporter of frustrated egos. Each culture has its particular storyline(s) about how *you* can be the hero.

The second option is the right one: Jesus is the hero of the story of history and of our lives in particular. People should respond to sermons, not focusing so much on themselves—on whether or not they measure up to the message—but with an overwhelming admiration for the heroism of Christ. Preaching Christ does not

⁶ Of course, this paradigm is all of Scripture, since it all speaks of Christ. Christ is so multi-faceted, rich and deep that it takes all of Scripture to reveal him to us. This supports the Westminster Confession, according to which Scripture interprets Scripture. However, as we come to Scripture we do so with a certain mindset: the mind of Christ and the illumination of the Spirit. According to the WCF, it is the Spirit (who points to Christ) speaking in the Scripture who is the ultimate judge of meaning.

⁷ John 5:39-40

⁸ The Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms cover the whole Old Testament (Luke 24:27,44).

mean refraining from exhorting people to biblical behavior, character and thinking. But this kind of exhortation must take place within the context of presenting Christ as the hero. Otherwise people too easily misinterpret the exhortations within the context of the culture's storyline.

Unfortunately, the first option is all too common in practice. Of course, no one (that I know of) preaches in a way that consciously makes us the hero instead of Christ. The typical problem is that the sermon does not clearly challenge the somewhat hidden but powerful assumptions that permeate our society, and that make *us* the hero. It does not, then, specifically contrast this storyline with Christ the hero. The hearers then interpret the work of Christ from the perspective of the "I am the hero" story. The story of the Bible whose hero is Christ is domesticated within the predominant storyline of our society.

There is a sense in which just saying "We should love one another" is a Christ-centered message. We know, if we think about it, that this short message presupposes the truth of the whole story whose hero is Jesus. However, we can't count on our audience interpreting it from the right perspective. Why not? We must be explicit in preaching Christ because there are powerful forces at work within our society bombarding us with its storyline, and because our flesh is tempted to believe the wrong story.⁹ We are all tempted to focus the story of Jesus in a self-centered way.

This was the problem in Israel when Christ came to them. They were expecting a Messiah who would overthrow the Romans and restore them to the glorious position they had under David and Solomon. Even the disciples were constantly filtering Christ's message through their "I am the hero" grid. They argued about who among them was the greatest, and who would sit at Jesus' right hand. They ignored or challenged Jesus when he spoke about going to the cross. And Christ constantly challenged them on their erroneous perspective.

To preach Christ we must consciously present him as the hero in every passage, and specifically use this to challenge the storyline of our society. Otherwise the message of Christ will most likely be co-opted into the viewpoint of our society, with the result that people "accept" not the true Christ, but a domesticated one, stripped as it were of his power and glory. They will for all practical purposes believe that great distortion of the gospel according to which Jesus' primary purpose is to help people be the hero.¹⁰

⁹ Romans 7:14-25

¹⁰ Of course, those who are committed to following Jesus as their hero become like him. As a result they too become heroes to their spouses, children, neighbors and acquaintances. But I don't want to dull the main point of this essay, so I put this thought in a footnote.