

# How to Preach Christ from Ecclesiastes

Sidney Greidanus

## INTRODUCTION

**E**cclésiastes is arguably the most relevant Bible book for our secular, materialistic culture. It addresses a long list of issues such as ignoring God, irreverent worship, the futility of pursuing pleasure and riches, human autonomy, individualism, the brevity of life and its anomalies, suffering, temptations, cutthroat competition, injustice, poverty, and oppression. It provides preaching

texts focusing on fearing God and keeping his commandments, reverently worshiping God in his house, God's decree, judgment, providence, sovereignty, and transcendence, our dependence on God, trusting God, suffering and death, using wisdom, marriage, and work, contentment, cooperating with each other, justice, giving to the poor, the limitations of wisdom, risk taking, living with paradoxes, living with uncertainties, and the meaning and enjoyment of life. The book of Ecclesiastes offers much material by which one may produce

powerfully relevant sermons.

But how do we preach Christ from Ecclesiastes? Most evangelicals will agree that Christian preaching is preaching Christ. When the selected preaching text is from the Old Testament, Christian preachers will still seek to preach Christ even as they do justice to the text in its Old Testament setting.

So how shall we preach Christ from the book of Ecclesiastes? In his *Lectures to My Students*, Spurgeon used a wonderfully vivid illustration. He said,

Don't you know, young man, that from every town and every village and every hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London? So from every text of Scripture there is a road to Christ. And my dear brother, your business is, when you get to a text, to say, now, what is the road to Christ? I have never found a text that had not got a road to Christ in it, and if ever I do find one, I will go over hedge and ditch but I would get at my Master, for the sermon cannot do any good unless there is a savor of Christ in it.<sup>1</sup>

---

SIDNEY GREIDANUS is Emeritus Professor of Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary. A widely respected author and preacher, he has written a number of books on preaching and hermeneutics, including *Preaching Christ From Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Eerdmans, 2010), *Preaching Christ From Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Eerdmans, 2007), *Preaching Christ in the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Eerdmans, 1999), and *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Eerdmans, 1988).

---

Not only is there a road to London from every village in England, there are usually several roads one can take. So it is with the ways in which preachers can move from the periphery of the Bible to its center, Jesus Christ.

The most common ways to move from an Old Testament text to Christ in the New Testament are the ways of promise-fulfillment and typology. But Ecclesiastes contains no promise of the coming Messiah, and it has only two possible types of Christ—the figure of “Solomon” in 1:12-2:26 and the “one shepherd” of 12:11. So how does one preach Christ from Ecclesiastes?

### ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

Jerome and the Church Fathers (and also Spurgeon on occasion) used allegorical interpretation to preach Christ from Ecclesiastes. For example, they understood “There is nothing better than to eat and drink” (Eccl 2:24) as eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist (the Lord’s Supper).<sup>2</sup> They interpreted the saying “One will lift the other” (Eccl 4:10) as Jesus lifting the other. They held that “a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Eccl 4:12) refers to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (Matthew Henry’s commentary applies the three-fold cord to a husband and wife who are joined by the Spirit of Christ).<sup>3</sup> The Church Fathers also employed more elaborate allegorical interpretation. For example, the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote about a “little city with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it.... Now there was found in it a poor wise man and he by his wisdom delivered the city” (Eccl 9:14-15). The little city was understood as the church, the king that besieged it was the devil, and the poor wise man that delivered it was Jesus.

Today we cannot with integrity employ allegorical interpretation to preach Christ.<sup>4</sup> Allegorical interpretation is arbitrary and subjective. It also reads Christ back into the Old Testament (which is eisegesis) and subverts the intention of the biblical author. How, then, shall we preach Christ from Ecclesiastes?

### DEFINITION OF PREACHING CHRIST

In researching the issue of preaching Christ from the Old Testament, it struck me that the common definition of “preaching Christ” as preaching the person and/or work of Christ is too narrow for Old Testament wisdom literature. Somewhere along the line we lost the *teaching* of Christ. In modern times this probably happened in the early 1900s when fundamentalists opposed the liberal Social Gospel preachers who emphasized the teachings of the prophets and of Jesus. In (over) reaction, the fundamentalists emphasized the fundamentals of Jesus’ person (e.g., Son of God, Savior) and work (e.g., his miracles, atonement, and resurrection). Thus the common definition of preaching Christ became “to preach the person and/or work of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Especially with wisdom literature in mind, I broadened the definition of preaching Christ to, “preaching sermons which authentically integrate the message of the text with the climax of God’s revelation in the person, work, and/or *teaching* of Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament.”<sup>6</sup>

My justification for this expansion was the plain fact that the New Testament highlights the importance of Jesus’ teachings. Paul speaks of Jesus as “wisdom from God” (1 Cor 1:24, 30) and claims that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). Jesus himself, the wisdom teacher *par excellence*, said to his disciples, “If you continue in my word [my teaching], you are truly my disciples” (John 8:31). Moreover, he commanded his disciples, “Go ... make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ..., and *teaching* them to obey everything that *I have commanded you*” (Matt 28:19-20, emphasis mine). John writes, “Everyone who does not abide in the *teaching* of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the *teaching* has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9, emphasis mine).

To preach Christocentric sermons, therefore, we should seek to link the message of the preaching text to Jesus’ person, work, or teachings. This

means that analogies between the teachings of Ecclesiastes and those of Jesus may become a major way for preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes.

### LEGITIMATE WAYS TO MOVE TO CHRIST

Although not a textbook for biblical hermeneutics, the New Testament hints at seven legitimate ways to move from Old Testament texts to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. These ways are:

- (1) Redemptive-historical progression: following the progression of redemptive history as it moves forward from the text's historical setting to Jesus' first or second coming;
- (2) Promise-fulfillment: showing that the promise of a coming Messiah was fulfilled in Jesus' arrival;
- (3) Typology: moving from an Old Testament type prefiguring Jesus to the antitype, Jesus himself;
- (4) Analogy: noting the similarity between the teaching of the text and that of Jesus;
- (5) Longitudinal themes: tracing a theme of the text through the Old Testament to Jesus in the New Testament;
- (6) New Testament references: moving to New Testament quotations of or allusions to the preaching text or to Jesus' similar teachings; and
- (7) Contrast: noting the contrast between the message of the text and that of Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

To paraphrase Spurgeon, when we have selected a preaching text from the Old Testament, our business is to ask: Now what are the roads to Christ? Usually we will discover that there are several roads to Christ and that we have a choice of which ways to travel. Let me demonstrate concretely how this works.<sup>8</sup>

#### **ECCLESIASTES 4:7-16**

Suppose we have selected as our preaching text Ecclesiastes 4:7-16. To do justice to the author's intention and also for the strongest link to Christ,

we need to determine the theme (the "point" or "big idea") of the text. This preaching text contains three sub-units. The overall structure of the text is a simple chiasm, A-B-A'.

(A) Anecdote of a solitary rich person whose life is vanity (4:7-8)

(B) Proverb: "Two are better than one" (4:9-12)

(A') Anecdote of a popular king whose life is vanity (4:13-16)

The Teacher (the writer of Ecclesiastes) shows that he intends to emphasize B not only by making it the focal point of the chiasm but also by supporting the proverb "two are better than one" with no less than three illustrations. Therefore we can formulate the textual theme of this text as follows: *Since working alone is futile, we ought to cooperate with others.* In view of the three supportive illustrations of this theme, the Teacher's goal is not merely to teach but to *persuade* his readers not to go it alone but to cooperate with others.

A good way to Christ in the New Testament is to use *longitudinal themes* supported by New Testament references. In Eden God declared, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Gen 2:18). God created humans as social beings. They are made to work together and help each other. God gave Israel many laws requiring care for the neighbor, the climax being "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). The Teacher echoes this law in Ecclesiastes 4 by calling solitary living "vanity," futile, useless, and by illustrating in three ways that "two are better than one." Jesus acknowledged this wisdom by gathering disciples around him and sending them out "two by two" (Mark 6:7). He also said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt 18:20). Jesus also reiterated the love commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39).

One can also follow the way of *analogy* supported by New Testament references. Like the Old Testament Teacher, Jesus urged cooperation with

others. He not only commanded “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:39) but also opposed greed—a form of selfishness that isolates us from one another. Jesus warned, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal” (Matt 6:19). He told the rich man, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Mark 10:21). Jesus’ parable of the rich fool is similar to the Teacher’s anecdote about the rich man (Eccl 4:7-8). The rich fool also had “ample goods laid up for many years.” Apparently, he also had no companion (“second one”) with whom to share his wealth, for God said to him, “This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, *whose* will they be?” (Luke 12:19-20; cf. Eccl 4:8, “For whom am I toiling?”). When a lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan who helped the man who had fallen “into the hands of robbers” (cf. Eccl 4:10). The neighbor was “the one who showed him mercy.” Jesus drove his point home with the words, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:29, 37).

#### **ECCLESIASTES 5:1-7**

Suppose our preaching text is Ecclesiastes 5:1-7. We must formulate a theme that covers all the points made in this passage: guarding your steps, listening, praying, fulfilling your vow, not calling your vow a mistake, and fearing God. All these components are held together by the theme of worshiping God in his temple. The imperatives “guard” and “fear” imply reverence for God. Therefore, the Teacher’s theme can be formulated: *Worship God in his house with reverence!* The imperatives indicate that the Teacher’s goal is to urge Israel to worship God in his house with reverence.

A good way to Jesus Christ in the New Testament is *analogy* supported by New Testament references. The Teacher urged Israel to worship God in his house with reverence because “God is in heaven, and you on earth.” Even though Jesus taught us that God is our Father, he also taught us

to remember that God is in heaven: “Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven” (Matt 6:9). During his ministry on earth, Jesus also demonstrated his concern for reverent worship in the temple. When he found that the temple courts had been turned into a market place, he “drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple and said, ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer”; but you are making it a den of robbers”’ (Matt 21:12-13).

With this text one can also use *analogies* between details of the Teacher’s instructions and those of Jesus. The Teacher exhorts us, “let your words be few,” because “God is in heaven, and you upon earth” (Eccl 5:2). Jesus similarly urged us to let our words be few: “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matt 6:7-8). Also, as the Teacher instructed Israel to “fear God” (Eccl 5:7), so Jesus said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28).

One can also follow the way of *redemptive-historical progression* supported by New Testament references. In Old Testament times people were required to bring their sacrifices (Eccl 5:1) to the temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus’ coming brought about a major change with respect to the animal sacrifices and the place of worship. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.... The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:21-23). People can now worship the Father wherever they are gathered in Jesus’ name (Matt 18:20). When Jesus died, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matt 27:51). The way into God’s presence was open again. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross ended the need for animal sacrifices once for all. Within forty

years of Jesus' death the temple was destroyed (A.D. 70) and the practice of sacrificing animals at the temple became impossible.

Paul also writes that through Christ Jesus we "have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2:18). Hebrews encourages us similarly:

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb 10:19-23).

With this passage one can also use the way of *contrast*. The Teacher said, "When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it" (Eccl 5:4). Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees "hypocrites" and "blind guides" for teaching that one need not fulfill all vows (Matt 23:16-22). Jesus said, "Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool.... Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'" (Matt 5:33-37).

#### **ECCLESIASTES 6:10-7:14**

Suppose our preaching text is Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14. We can formulate the theme of this passage as follows: *Since God has sovereignly set the times, in times of adversity people should look for what is relatively good.* The Teacher's goal is to encourage suffering people to show their trust in the sovereign God by looking for what is relatively good in times of adversity.

A good way to move to Jesus in the New Testament is *longitudinal themes* supported by New Testament references. The Old Testament sees suffering mostly as God's punishment. Human disobedience resulted in Adam and Eve being driven out of Eden, pain in childbearing, toil to eke out a living, and death (Gen 3:16-19, 23). Suffering was mainly a negative experience for Israel. Yet

there was also good in their suffering: God used it to bring Israel back into God's fold (see, e.g., Judg 3:7-30 and Isa 40:1-2). The Teacher also argues that there is a positive aspect to human suffering: people can look for what is relatively good in times of adversity. The New Testament continues this theme. Jesus calls those who suffer "blessed" (Luke 6:20-23), but he provides a different reason from that of the Teacher. Jesus points to the future that awaits: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you *will* laugh" (Luke 6:21, emphasis mine). Peter adds, "But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:13).

One can also move to Christ by the way of *contrast*. Since the Teacher thought that death was the end of human life (Eccl 2:15-16; 3:19-21; 9:5), he advised people to look for what is relatively good in times of adversity. By contrast, the New Testament emphasizes that there is life beyond death: "Blessed are you when people hate you ... and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven" (Luke 6:22-23). Moreover, the Teacher instructs his readers to look for some good in times of adversity—in part because they do not know what the future holds. By contrast, Jesus and the New Testament teach us to look for the good in adversity because of what our future holds: the glory of being part of the perfect kingdom of God (Rom 8:18).

#### **ECCLESIASTES 11:1-6**

We shall use Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 as a final example. The inclusio of verses 1 and 6 ("Send out your bread upon the waters, for ... In the morning sow your seed, for ...") provides a major clue for determining the Teacher's theme which we can formulate as follows: *Since we do not know what God will prosper, use every opportunity to work boldly but wisely.* Noting the Teacher's imperatives, his goal was to *urge* his readers not to be paralyzed by their lack of knowledge but to use every opportunity to

work boldly but wisely.

A good way from this passage to Jesus Christ is *analogy* supported by New Testament references. As the Teacher urged his readers to use every opportunity to work, so Jesus urged his hearers to work diligently. Jesus said, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work” (John 9:4). Jesus also told the Parable of the Talents in which the hard-working, risk-taking servants were rewarded while the lazy, play-it-safe servant was punished (Matt 25:14-30). Also, Paul speaks for “the Lord” when he tells the Ephesians: “Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy” (Eph 4:17, 21, 28).

Another analogy would focus on verse 6: as the Teacher urged his readers to sow their seed both morning and evening, “for you do not know which will prosper,” so Jesus told his hearers the Parable of the Sower who sowed the seed liberally (on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil), not knowing which would prosper (Matt 13:3-9, 18-23). As Christians we are to sow “the word of the kingdom” (Matt 13:19) extravagantly since we do not know what God will prosper.<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I encourage pastors to preach one or more series of sermons on this amazing practical book. The overall title can be “The Gospel of Ecclesiastes.” This enigmatic book, which many people write off as too pessimistic, is actually boldly realistic. It is filled with inspired wisdom which through Jesus Christ can speak powerfully to people in our day and age.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 49.

<sup>2</sup>All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

<sup>3</sup>A three-fold cord is literally a rope with three strands twisted together. It probably alludes “to a well-known ancient Near Eastern proverb concerning the benefits

of friendship.” Tremper Longman, III, *Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 143.

<sup>4</sup>This statement does not deny that allegorical interpretation is appropriate for allegories, e.g. Eccl 12:3-4.

<sup>5</sup>Although “the work of Christ” could include his teaching, it is usually understood as the work of Christ on the cross for our salvation.

<sup>6</sup>*Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 10.

<sup>7</sup>For detailed descriptions of these ways and many examples, see my *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 203-77.

<sup>8</sup>For detailed argumentation for the parameters of the following textual units as well as the formulations of themes and goals, see my *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

<sup>9</sup>This is, admittedly, a more focused application than the Teacher had in mind.