

How Do We Preach Christ from the Old Testament? A Response to Daniel Block, Elliott Johnson, and Vern Poythress

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In responding to essays by three well-known evangelical preachers, each presenting its author's perspective on preaching, the question arises "How do they differ from one another?" At the outset I would like to say that, while I have read each essay several times and summarized their arguments, it is possible I have at times misunderstood the authorial intent. If so, I apologize in advance. I can only respond to what I perceive the arguments to be, and to do so in a way that reflects my own views on preaching.

Vern Poythress heads his essay, "Christocentric Preaching," while Elliott Johnson's is entitled "Expository Preaching and Christo-Promise." Finally, we have Daniel Block's essay "Christotelic Preaching." At first sight, none of these alternative descriptions excludes the others; I see them as different aspects of what I would consider to be an adequate sermon. First, I want

to present some of my own convictions that will largely determine how I view these essays.

I believe the most basic principle that determines our preaching method is our attitude to the inspiration and authority of the Bible. This will be reflected in our Christian theistic worldview, and it has ramifications for all the variables that will affect how we read, understand, and preach biblical texts. The second principle is the unity within the diversity of both the theology and the literature of the Bible. Holy Scripture contains a collection of books that we include under the one cover because the Christian Church has, since the acceptance of the canon, always recognized the underlying important unifying factors that make the canon what it is.

The unity of the Bible involves our attitude to the Old Testament (OT) and how it relates to the New (NT). The doctrinal confession of my own (Anglican) denomination asserts: “The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man.”¹ This implies that the OT is about Christ. When this is queried, I want to ask, “If the OT is not about Christ, what is it about?” Of course, it is about Yahweh and Israel and many other things. But, it is about Christ if we accept the unity of Scripture as the one word of the one God about the one way of salvation through the one savior Jesus Christ. For the evangelical, the authoritative word of God gains its unity, not only from its divine authorship, but from the relationship of all its parts to the central feature of God revealing himself and providing salvation in his Son, Jesus Christ.

I regard these two main principles of divine inspiration and unity within diversity as essential to the evangelical use of the Bible. But, I also recognize that “evangelical” covers a range of different emphases, as our three essays under review demonstrate. Thus, a third principle that affects our understanding of the unity of Scripture and, with it, our preaching, is the structure of that unity. Structure is a matter that exercises all biblical theologians who address the task of understanding the unity of either or both Testaments. It underpins any concern for a central theological theme and for a continuous historical narrative to the Bible. Although the structure of revelation is seminal in moving from text to sermon, it is here that there is so much variety in the hermeneutic processes among

evangelicals.

As a broad assessment, that I grant carries the risk of over simplification, I believe that the biblical theologian's view of Scripture affects the conclusions reached through biblical-theological study, and this influences the approach to sermon construction. When I set out to write a book about using the whole Bible to preach Christ, I surveyed every book about preaching that I could lay my hands on.² I was astonished to find how few of them even acknowledged that biblical theology should be a concern for the preacher. But, one cannot refer to biblical theology as a distinct theological discipline without also implying the importance of systematic theology.³ Unfortunately there are those who discount the importance of either in preaching. Yet, every preacher and biblical theologian will come to the task with some systematic or dogmatic theological presuppositions about the Bible and the place of preaching.

Essential to an evangelical biblical theology is the dogmatic construct of *unity and distinction* as the principle governing all relationships. This is derived from the doctrine of the Trinity and the relationship of the three Persons as unity (one God) and distinction (three Persons). This reality is also reflected in the Incarnation in that Jesus is one Person, two Natures (fully divine; fully human; two natures but one person). While the Christian Church did not provide an enduring formulation of this until the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), the principle governs everything in the Bible from start to finish. It is well summed up as the principle of unity with no fusion, and distinction with no separation. It thus controls the relationship of every part or every text of the Bible to every other part or text. For a Christian approach to Scripture, unity-distinction is relevant to the narrative progression and to the relationship between OT and NT. It underpins any sense of progressive revelation and of the relationship of all texts to Christ.

Historically, evangelical theology includes two very different approaches to the unity and distinction in the Bible: the dispensational and the covenantal. The former breaches the dualism of unity and distinction by dividing its various dispensations, virtually separating them from each other, appealing to criteria that are not unique to each dispensation. It also imposes an unbiblical hermeneutic of a rigidly literalistic fulfillment of prophecy, something the NT knows nothing of. Covenant theologians, by

contrast, are sometimes charged with asserting the unity of the covenants too strongly. And, as there are varieties of dispensationalism, so also there are varieties of covenant theology. Thus, even amongst evangelical biblical theologians there are found considerable differences of opinion concerning the understanding of the structure of revelation.

The three essays under consideration do, I believe, proceed from the presuppositions of divine inspiration and authority of the Bible, and its central role of testifying to Christ as the one mediator between God and man. They all recognize the role of preaching to proclaim Christ. They all indicate the importance of a sound reading of the OT text using a grammatical-historical method. An evangelical grammatical-historical approach views the biblical narrative as entirely reliable and rejects the higher-critical attempts to reconstruct the “real” history of the creation and of Israel. I will now address each of the essays contributed in alphabetical order of the authors.

DANIEL BLOCK: CHRISTOTELIC PREACHING

My first comment is that I am somewhat mystified by Block’s statistics concerning the occurrences of the name *Jesus* and the title *Christ* in Scripture, and what he is seeking to conclude from them. It seems that Bible Works has led him to conclude that the name *Jesus* is more common than the title *Christ* as the designation of God the Son. In doing so, it apparently ignores the dynamics of the NT. It also seems that Block’s statistical analysis has isolated *Jesus* from *Christ* when the two occur together. My search,⁴ however, indicates that *Jesus* is the predominant designation in the Gospels and Acts. I would expect that to be the case. But the designations *Jesus Christ*, *Christ Jesus*, or *Christ* are by far and away the most frequent names in the epistles, which are the post-Pentecost teachings for Christian churches. And, I would expect that to be the case also. The Gospels are, of course, also written post-Pentecost, but they understandably use the appropriate terminology for the *Jesus*-narratives. While *Jesus* is here on earth his disciples, those who literally followed him around Palestine, knew him as *Jesus*. Peter tells us at Pentecost that the ascension signifies that God has made this *Jesus* both Lord and *Christ* (Acts 2:36). I would therefore expect the theological reflections on the significance of this to use the title

Christ, with or without the name Jesus. It is part of the dynamic of the gospel that is also reflected in the fact that, after the ascension, Christians are not said to follow Jesus, nor are they designated disciples.⁵ There is clearly a distinction in Scripture between those who knew the incarnate Christ while he was here on earth, and between those who know him through his Word and Spirit since his ascension.

What, then, is Block's distinction between Christotelic and Christocentric? His two diagrams are not explained but seem to suggest that a Christotelic hermeneutic follows the stages of revelation in salvation history, while a Christocentric hermeneutic is prone to go directly from text to the cross. There is probably a semantic problem here. I have consistently referred to my approach as Christocentric, which has never meant to me that we avoid the stages of progressive revelation. I regard them as essential to sound interpretation. I do not understand Block's distinctions here. Nor do I understand what he means when, in one of a number of pejorative dismissals of those he disagrees with, he refers to modern day charlatans and quotes Ezekiel 13:2-3. Is he saying that Christocentric interpreters are charlatans who are following their own impulses?

Historically, there are two main methods that have been used to move from an OT text to its fulfillment in Christ. Allegory often employs a kind of Freudian free-association of words. I read one commentator who used this method in referring to the decorative pomegranates on the priest's robes (Exod 39:24-26), and then resorted to word association thus: pomegranate = fruit = fruit of the Spirit; which led to a sermon on Galatians 5:22-24!⁶ This allegorizing completely ignores the historical meaning of the text. While I agree with Block that it is unsafe to rely on Luke 24:27 alone to assert that all OT texts are about Christ, his interpretation is equally unsafe. Luke 24:27 does not prove that Jesus cherry-picked the appropriate texts, selecting only the ones that were directly about him, from all the Scriptures. There is so much more in the NT that substantiates the link between the entire OT and Jesus the Christ. Block seems to be saying (I beg his pardon if I misunderstand him) that Christocentric means dealing only with specifically messianic texts, thus excluding a whole range of texts including complete books of the OT. I have never thought of Christocentric in this way. I would argue that all OT texts testify to Jesus Christ, though some do so more directly than others. Jesus was more than the Jewish messiah; he

was, for example, the new creation, the new temple, the new Israel. If, in the fullness of time God has summed up *all* things in Christ (Eph 1:9-10), this must include the whole OT. He represents the renewal of all created reality in its true relation with the Creator.

When Block says: “It is no wonder that our Jewish friends are upset with us; we have hijacked their Scriptures, and made every text about Christ, often paying no attention to what the divine and human authors originally intended” (p. 13), it is not at all clear what he is getting at. Is he saying that OT texts have only one (Jewish) meaning? If we have “hijacked” the Jewish Scriptures is only because Jesus and the Apostles did so. But in fact, they did not hijack anything, they only laid claim to what belonged to them. We must recognize the hermeneutical divide that the coming of Jesus caused. Jewish interpretation was split between those who saw their Scriptures as about Jesus Christ as the Messiah, and those who rejected then, and go on rejecting now, the claims of Jesus to be the fulfiller of the Hebrew Scriptures. The use of “hijack” as a pejorative is unhelpful. If Jesus is the Jewish messiah, as we believe, then to see the OT as Christian Scripture is not to hijack it but to follow the interpretation of Jesus and the Apostles. Of course, we need to deal fairly with the text in its OT context, but if it cannot then be related to Christ and his people, why bother with it at all in a Christian sermon? Jews who reject Jesus as Messiah may well be our friends, but their refusal to submit to Jesus is tragic. When Block comments, “Later revelation cannot correct, annul, or contradict earlier revelation,” and God “never needs to say, ‘Oops! I was wrong’” (p. 16), I think a straw man is confusing the issue here.

Block’s treatment of the text of Genesis 15:1-6 provides an exemplary piece of grammatical-historical exegesis, though somewhat of an overkill. It is a thorough and enlightening exposition of the dynamics of the narrative. It is also an important reminder that avoiding due exegetical care so that we can “make a bee-line to the cross,” is not an option. (I can’t believe Spurgeon would have said that!) When Block says that “Not every text of Scripture points to Jesus Christ as Messiah, but every text presents a vital part of that story of Jesus, ‘who is also called the Christ’” (p. 14), I find this confusing. I would have liked him to demonstrate this with the prescribed text. After all, a sermon is more than exegesis.

Block’s polemics against evangelicals along with Ambrose and Luther

makes me suspect that again there are a few straw men hiding in the detail. To me, Christocentric hermeneutics seeks to understand the text by a close reading, but it likewise understands the dynamic that leads to Christ. It also recognizes that we need the OT to understand Jesus as its fulfiller. But, since Jesus is God's last and definitive Word, he determines the ultimate meaning of the OT. That is what I understand Christocentric hermeneutics to be all about. If "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad," (John 8:56), can we not rejoice with Abraham to see the day of Christ from his OT perspective? God's fullest and final Word, Jesus, is the hermeneutical norm, not just for Scripture, but for every fact in all reality.

ELLIOTT JOHNSON: EXPOSITORY PREACHING AND CHRISTO-PROMISE

Johnson's essay focuses on the promissory nature of OT texts in dealing with the prescribed text to demonstrate the approach. The initial problem recognized is that of combining a grammatical-historical hermeneutic with the presence of Christ in an OT text. His approach is to deal with it in terms of promise. Johnson asserts that, "prophecy, OT Scripture, and promise, find a central and essential place for Jesus Christ according to the NT" (p. 36). With this I can only concur. He tells us that: "It is the intent of this essay to demonstrate that a *grammatical* interpretation of various OT examples of promise includes the presence of Christ. This is because the promise is expressed as progressively unfolding in *history*" (p. 36). This dynamic of promise and fulfillment is shared by dispensationalists and covenant theologians in its essence. Johnson does not seem to accept Block's apparent hang-ups about fulfillment in Christ. Taking the theme of promise, he deals with the way Genesis 15:1-6 embodies promise that is fulfilled in Christ. Thus, his conclusion is a sermon application that is Christian in a way that I think Block backs away from.

Johnson begins by defining promise with a common sense hermeneutic. He then moves on to deal with what he calls "Christo-promise" which, I think, is a self-explanatory term. The presupposition of this promise is the creation and fall. The Christo-promise is exemplified in God's promise to Abraham concerning the nations, and the necessity of an appropriate

response. The law was added to test the appropriateness of the response of Abraham and his descendants. The history of those descendants demonstrates that only the descendant chosen by God as his partner in the promise, namely Christ satisfies the requirements of the law. Between Abraham and Christ, the promise was progressively unfolded. Although Johnson's outline of this process stops with Joshua, I think we can assume that he includes the entire fickle history of Israel and its final demise in this progression. Prophetic eschatology is presumably involved in this history.

Johnson's conclusion is that: "Jesus Christ did not *replace* Israel, but *represented* Israel in her partnership with God. So, Israel was the covenant partner (Rom 9:4–5), a partnership which was intended to be fulfilled through a coming Offspring" (p. 42). I find this somewhat confusing. His dispensational roots seem to be in evidence here, but to what extent is not clear. Dispensationalists typically accuse covenant theologians of embracing a "replacement theology." They reject the claim that the church is the new Israel, thus replacing historic Israel. I grant this is a view that has some popularity, but not universally held in that form. I prefer to talk of fulfillment theology.⁷ Jesus Christ *is* the true Israel, and Jews who are outside of Christ are not true Israel. Dispensationalists and, in my opinion, all premillennial approaches to prophecy, diminish the role of Jesus as fulfiller. Jesus does not merely represent Israel, he *is* Israel, and fulfills all God's promises as 2 Corinthians 1:20 indicates. I think Johnson misses out by not looking seriously at the theme of covenant as structuring the progressive nature of the promise. The content of the covenant is the kingdom of God, a central theme that I have championed from time to time.⁸

Johnson's handling of the chosen passage, Genesis 15:1-6 is a rather sketchy treatment of the main hermeneutic points getting from the promissory origins of the blessing to the nations, to the fulfillment in the true seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ. A fuller outline of how he would translate this into a sermon would have been helpful. I value what appears to be his position on Jew and Gentile, in that it preserves the role of those we refer to today as Messianic Jews (Jewish Christians) as the objects of God's promise to Abraham, and who have the privilege of sharing their gospel with us who are Gentiles.⁹

VERN S. POYTHRESS: CHRISTOCENTRIC PREACHING

I fully expected to be most at peace with Poythress's essay in that I share the general covenantal view that his use of Clowney's diagram suggests. Clowney's *Preaching and Biblical Theology* was standard reading for our students at Moore College in the 1960s and since.¹⁰ I have indicated my qualifications of the covenantal-epochal structure elsewhere.¹¹ Poythress warns us that he does not consider himself a typical representative of the Christocentric approach. It would have helped if he had specified how he differs from it. He also declares that he is against Christomonism which he understands as preaching *only* on Christ incarnate, and preaching Christ apart from the context of the Father and the Spirit. While I am also against the latter, I must query the meaning of the former.

Let me explain that qualification. I would have thought that Clowney's approach to typology would include the fact that there is no other Christ than Christ incarnate. The OT is about Christ incarnate foreshadowed.¹² The OT is about God's actions within our space and time, which anticipate the incarnation and are fulfilled in it. The incarnation is not only *in* our space and time—it defines it. The Gospels are about Christ as incarnate and present. The remainder of the NT speaks about Christ incarnate, ascended, and present by his Spirit, who will come again in incarnated glory to judge the living and the dead (Luke 1:11). The NT says little about the pre-incarnate and pre-existent second Person of the Trinity, although what it does say is significant. To preach the pre-incarnate Christ in the OT is to preach him whose whole significance in the OT is the prospect of his coming incarnation and ministry fulfilling the OT. It is also to acknowledge him as the Word of God who becomes flesh (John 1:14). Poythress enunciates principles of a biblical-theological preaching approach that is also Christocentric. I can only wish that he had gone on to demonstrate these with a treatment of Genesis 15:1-6 showing how he would go from text to sermon.

SUMMARY CONCLUSION

The present form of the three essays under review leave me somewhat disappointed. While they demonstrate to some degree that being

evangelical in one's attitude to the inspiration and authority of Scripture does not mean that we will necessarily develop our hermeneutic principles in the same way, I find unsatisfying the failure to demonstrate their respective homiletic approach with more detailed attention to preaching the prescribed text. We should rejoice in the common cause to honor the Bible as God's word, and in the desire to see Christ proclaimed in a way that will make the offer of the Gospel to the whole world. We must nevertheless continue to scrutinize and test our own presuppositions and their logical outworking in preaching and teaching. Comparing the different approaches of the three essays under review is an opportunity for us to be carefully critical of our own approach.

I considered first Block's Christotelic essay. I found his use of technical terms confusing, particularly in discussing what is requisite in a Christian sermon. Block says, "However, if we would preach Genesis 15:6, we must preach Genesis 15:6, and not some message that later biblical authors adopted and adapted for quite different polemical purposes" (p. 26). What does this statement mean? Block raises the question we all must wrestle with: "What is a Christian sermon on an OT text?" I must respectfully differ from him in his diminishing of "the message that later biblical authors adopted and adapted for different polemical purposes" (p. 26). If Jesus did it, and the Apostles did it, why should we not do it? After all, was this not the ultimate meaning in the mind of God?

Johnson's apparent premillennial view of Christ in his gospel raises a wider question of fulfillment or eschatology. It is not clear to what extent he follows a dispensationalist approach. So, these comments may not be pertinent. Not only is the literalistic fulfillment of premillennialism absent from the NT (the apocalyptic symbolism of Revelation 20 does not support it; nor can we cram a secret rapture into 1 Thess 4:16-17), but it destabilizes the relationship between justification, sanctification, and glorification. I believe the NT teaches that ALL OT expectation is fulfilled FOR us in Jesus of Nazareth; goes on being fulfilled IN us and in the world through the Spirit's application of the preached gospel; and will be fulfilled consummatively WITH us at the Parousia.¹³

Positively, then, I have noted the following plusses in the three essays. First, Daniel Block forces me to consider what, if any, differences lie in the respective hermeneutics of Christocentric and Christotelic preaching.

Then, I must express my admiration for the detailed example of grammatical-historical exegesis. No sermon preparation should ever proceed without careful exegesis of the text. Second, Elliott Johnson's emphasis on promise as a key component of the OT is important as a vital link between the two Testaments. Third, Vern Poythress sketches a Christocentric approach that we can all learn from. His use of Clowney's diagram points us in the direction of a scrupulously careful use of typology structured on the unity of the covenantal epochs.

My final point is a practical one. What strategy do we use as pastors in preaching to a congregation? Of course, as Block remarks, not every sermon will be evangelistic. A stable and continuous situation, for example a father regularly teaching his family around the dinner table, or a church home group that meets weekly, does not need on every occasion to make a direct application of the text to Christ. However, any application that is made apart from Christ tends to lead to legalism or moralism. When it comes to a Sunday congregation in the local church, we need to be attuned to its present spiritual needs. Here I prefer the attitude of a friend of mine who said: "If someone comes in to a meeting by chance or is brought by a friend, provided he or she is listening, then, when it is over, I want him or her to know what we are on about." It is to be hoped that we are always on about Jesus and the salvation he has won for us.

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1. Articles of Religion, 1562: Article VII. *Of the Old Testament*.
 2. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
 3. I have dealt with this matter in my essay: "'Thus Says the Lord!'—The Dogmatic Basis of Biblical Theology," in *God Who is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to Dr. D. B. Knox* (P. T. O'Brien and D. G. Peterson, ed.; Homebush West NSW/Grand Rapids: Lancer Books/Baker, 1986), 25-40.
 4. Using a well-worn hard copy of *Young's Analytical Concordance of the KJV*.
 5. There is one metaphorical reference to Christ leaving us and example that we might follow in his steps (1 Pet 2:21).
 6. I have also read a print-out of a sermon on Nehemiah repairing the gates of Jerusalem (Neh 3). The preacher chose to deal only with the Sheep Gate (Neh 3:1-2) and the Horse Gate (Neh 3:28), and ignored other gates including the Dung Gate! The arguments went thus: Sheep Gate = Sheep with shepherd = the Good Shepherd and a sermon on John 10; Horse Gate = horse with riders = riders are mainly soldiers = soldiers wear armor = sermon on "put on the whole armor of God" from Eph 6. I regard this as an appalling use of the OT.
 7. I endorse Donald Robinson's view that the church consists of spiritual Israel with spiritual Gentiles grafted in. See Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 201-206, and the articles by Robinson referenced there. See also Lionel J. Windsor, *Reading*

Ephesians and Colossians After Supersessionism: Christ's Mission Through Israel to the Nations (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017).

8. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1981), now part of *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2000); *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991).
9. This is very different from the dispensationalist's separation of the salvation of Jew and Gentile.
10. Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961).
11. Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology*, 84-88.
12. So, Poythress's book, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991).
13. This view is simply another way of speaking of our salvation as "I have been saved; I am being saved; I will be saved." The fulfillment of prophecy for us, in us, and with us, is ably set out by Adrio König, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology: Toward a Christ-Centered Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). The fulfillment is not a part + a part + a part, but all + all + all, but in different ways.