

GRACE CHURCH OF NAPA

PREACH CHRIST

*Why and How Every Pastor Must
Practice Christ-Centered Preaching*



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Preach Christ

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The Apostle Paul said, “we Preach Christ.” (1 Cor. 1:23). This kind of preaching resulted in the release of “the power of God and the wisdom of God” to save and transform lives (1 Cor. 1:24-30). Everything a Church desire to accomplish is rooted in the kind of preaching it has. The spiritual health and effectiveness of a Pastor and Church’s ministry is determined in large part by how the Bible is preached. The following three questions may help you to answer the question “Do I Preach Christ?”

- **What is *Christ-Centered Preaching*?**
- **How do we *Know Preaching Must be Christ-Centered*?**
- **What *difference* does it make if preaching is NOT Christ-Centered?**

Chapter One

WHAT IS *CHRIST-CENTERED* PREACHING?

Virtually all Evangelical Christianity affirms Christ-centered preaching. Even Christendom outside Evangelicalism affirms this. Greek Orthodox scholar George Florovsky say “Ministers are commissioned and ordained in the church precisely to preach the word of God...namely the gospel of Jesus Christ — and they are committed to this sole and perennial message.”¹ Roman Catholic author Domenico Grasso makes the claim that, “The object and content of preaching is Christ, the Word in which He expresses Himself and communicated His will to man.”² But merely claiming Christ-centered preaching does not make it so.. Christ-centered preaching is not simply mentioning the name of Christ in a sermon, or tacking his name at the end in an altar call.

1. Christ-centered preaching recognizes the goal and fulfillment of all scripture is Christ (Luke 24:27; 1 Peter 1:12) and therefore preaches all text in light of the biblical context of God’s redemptive plan fulfilled in Christ.

In other words, it understands that all scriptures point to the need for, and provision of, God’s Grace through Christ’s redemption. Christ-centered preaching is more than exhortations to godly moral living. It is not simply moralistic “how-to” sermons in isolation from Christ.

The Apostle Paul rooted his exhortations to godly living on three things:

- *Explanations* of the glory of Christ's person and work on sinner’s behalf (Romans 12:1; Ephesians 4:1; Colossians 3:1)
- *Motivations* to glorify God and Christ (I Corinthians 10:31; Romans 12:2), and
- *Impartation* of Christ’s power in order to practice Christian character (Gal. 2:20; Romans 7:25).

Bryan Chapell in his book *Christ-centered Preaching* clarifies this point:

No passage tells us what we can do or should do to make ourselves holy (as though we could lift ourselves by our own bootstraps to divine approval). The Bible is not a self-help book. Scripture presents one, consistent, organic message. It tells us how we must seek Christ, who alone is our Savior and source of strength, to be and do what God requires. To preach what people should be and do and yet not mention him who enables their accomplishment warps the biblical message. God's redemptive work is integral to every biblical passage's proper exposition.³

2. Christ-centered preaching is distinctively Christian, not pluralistic.

Such preaching will declare how all biblical texts, even the Old Testament ones, point to Christ (Luke 24:27) by showing man's need for a Him as savior (by revealing his sinful, hopeless condition), or by foreshadowing, foretelling or illustrating the Grace of God in providing Christ. Jay Adams notes this about Christ-centered preaching:

If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the members of a Jewish synagogue or to a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it. Preaching, when it is truly Christian, is distinctive. And what makes it distinctive is the all-pervading presence of a saving and sanctifying Christ. Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach.⁴

Edmond Clowney also notes the true nature of Christ-centered preaching when he says,

The Scriptures are full of moral instruction and ethical exhortation, but the ground and motivation of all is found in the mercy of Jesus Christ. We are to preach all the riches of Scripture, but unless the center holds, all the bits and pieces of our pulpit counseling, of our thundering at social sins . . . all fly off into the Sunday morning air . . . Let others develop the pulpit fads of the passing seasons. Specialize in preaching Christ.⁵

3. Christ-centered preaching is God-centered not man-centered.

Its central thrust is to reveal the glory of God's Grace in redeeming sinners (Ephesians 1:6,12,14). Its message includes the description of man's sin and God's wrath (Isaiah 61:1-2) and will have as its core the Cross of Christ (1 Cor. 2:1-3). Preaching the Cross means preaching the *need* for the Cross as well as the meaning of it. Preaching the need of the Cross would explain what the Bible says about God's holiness, justice and wrath and man's sinfulness and condemnation (Romans 1:16-3:20). Preaching the meaning of the Cross would explain the substitutionary death of Christ alone as the only remedy for man's sin (Gal. 2:21; 1 Cor. 1:21-26) and urge people to faith in Christ alone as the only basis for salvation (Romans 3:31-4:11).

Man-centered preaching sees the cross as validating man's worth and thus sees preaching as a means of building man's self-esteem. John Piper eloquently notes how unbiblical this kind of preaching is:

It took the infinitely costly death of the Son of God to repair the dishonor that my pride has brought upon the glory of God. It horribly skews the meaning of the cross when contemporary prophets of self-esteem say that the cross is a witness to my infinite worth, since God was willing to pay such a high price to get me. The biblical perspective is that the cross is a witness to the infinite worth of God's glory, and a witness to the immensity of the sin of my pride. What should shock us is that we have brought such contempt upon the worth of God that the very death of His Son is required to vindicate that worth. The cross stands in witness to the infinite worth of God and the infinite outrage of sin.⁶

4. Christ-centered preaching will be rejected by most people but is the power of God to save.

Paul said preaching the Cross of Christ and all that it entails is inherently foolish and offensive to mankind (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:14), yet *"God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe"* (1 Cor. 1:21). Piper notes this tension:

. . . here is the age-old difference between the way natural man sees the problem of his relation to God and the way the Bible sees the problem of man's relation to God. Man-centered humans are amazed that God should withhold life and joy from his creatures. But the God-centered Bible is amazed that God should withhold judgment from sinners. One of the implications this has for preaching is that preachers who take their cue from the Bible and not from the world will always be wrestling with spiritual realities that many of their hearers do not even know exist or think essential.⁷

Paul the Apostle spoke of this implication in 2 Timothy 4:2-4 when he exhorted pastors to,

Preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season... For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers and will turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside unto fables. (NKJV)

Chapter Two

HOW DO WE *KNOW* PREACHING MUST BE CHRIST-CENTERED?

Christ did not leave it up to each generation of preachers to decide what the content, goal and focus of preaching was to be. He clearly revealed preaching was to be centered upon and point to Himself. There are several ways that Christ made this clear.

1. Christ-centered preaching is mandated because Christ pointed to Himself as the one to which all scriptures point and are fulfilled.

In Luke 24:27 it says ‘And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.’ Jesus made it clear to the Emmaus disciples that all the Old Testament scriptures pointed to Himself. He repeats this again in Luke 24:44 when He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Again in John 5:39-40 He indicates the purpose of the Old Testament when He says, "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me." Christ is giving Himself as the lens through which all scripture must be understood.

All Old Testament texts therefore relate to Christ in seminal form. Bryan Chapell brings clarity to this when he says,

We must relate even seed-form aspects of a text to the mature message they signal or for which they prepare us in order to interpret fully and rightly what the passage means. You do not explain what an acorn is, even if you say many true things about it (e.g., it is brown, has a cap, is found on the ground, is gathered by squirrels), if you do not in some way relate it to an oak tree. In a similar sense, preachers cannot properly explain a seed (or portion) of biblical revelation, even if they say many true things about it, unless they relate it to the redeeming work of God that

all Scripture ultimately purposes to disclose. In this sense, the entire Bible is Christ-centered because his redemptive work in all of its incarnational, atoning, rising, interceding, and reigning dimensions is the capstone of all of God's revelation of his dealings with his people. Thus, no aspect of revelation can be thoroughly understood or explained in isolation from some aspect of Christ's redeeming work.⁸

Christ-centered preaching is therefore necessitated by the very nature of scriptures. They were written pointing to Christ. To not preach Christ-centered sermons is to ignore the divinely indicated Christological context of the scriptures. It is to dishonor Christ by ignoring His claim to be the ultimate purpose of every passage.

2. Christ-centered preaching is mandated because the Old Testament law was given to point to Christ not to simply provide moral guidance.

Many men mistakenly preach the Mosaic Law as God's rules to be kept in order to please Him.. However, though this is to a degree true in that the Law reveals the holiness of God (Romans 7:12), it is not the primary purpose of the Law.

Paul reveals the purpose of the law in Galatians when he says, *"Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions . . . For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. . . . But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Therefore the Law has become our tutor to **lead us to Christ**, that we may be justified by faith"* (Gal. 3:19,21-22,24). Paul makes it clear that the purpose of the Law was to reveal man's sinfulness to him and thus lead God's people to Christ as their only means of salvation. Therefore, even though the Old Testament passages of the Law do not mention Christ, they are Christological in purpose in that they point to Him. Chapell summarizes the implications of this well:

When Paul writes to the Galatians that the purpose of the mosaic law was to lead the people of God to Christ, we not only learn why God provided the commands but also

understand why a sermon that only exhorts believers not to steal is incomplete. As was every tenet of the law, the eighth commandment was more than a moral standard. It was also a theological lens picturing the frailty of the soul. Old Testament believers were to understand their need of faith in the Redeemer based on their inability to keep any divine imperative perfectly (Gal.2:15-21). Exposition of the Law that fails to make this point advances an implicit legalism and misses the explanation that the Bible itself offers for God's commands. . . Comprehensive explanation of *what* God requires falls short of adequate exposition if it fails to say *why* God set the standard. (italics - mine).⁹

Therefore Christ-centered preaching is mandated by the very nature of the Old Testament law. To fail to do so is to misrepresent the purpose of the Law and therefore condemn one's hearers by leading them to use as a means of righteousness that which was *intended to reveal their unrighteousness*.

3. Christ-centered preaching is mandated because of the Apostolic model of preaching.

The chief subject of the Apostles preaching and teaching ministry was the words and works of Jesus. Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36) was a "concise, cohesive presentation of the Lord Jesus Christ outlining His life and miracles (v.22), death (v.23), resurrection (vv.24-32), and exaltation (vv.33-36)."¹⁰ Peter's sermon in Acts 3 also focused on Christ, highlighting His death, resurrection and glorification (vv.13-16), His return to set up His kingdom (vv. 20-22) and His authority and judgment (22-23).

Paul's sermon in Acts 13 reflects the same emphasis. He testifies to Christ's Davidic ancestry (vv.22-23), His forerunner and herald John the Baptist (vv.24-25), His death and burial (vv.26-29), His resurrection (vv. 30-37) and His offer of salvation (vv. 37-40).

Paul's preaching to the Thessalonians is described as him "*reasoning with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead . . . saying 'This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ'*" (Acts 17:2-3).

When preaching before King Agrippa, Paul minced no words but clearly focused on Christ saying, *“Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come – that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles”* (Acts 26:22-23).

Preaching that is not Christ-centered contradicts the emphasis which was modeled by the Apostle’s preaching.

4. Christ-centered preaching is mandated because of the practice modeled by those commissioned by the Apostles.

Philip was chosen by the congregation and then commissioned by the Apostles to serve the church in Jerusalem (Acts 6:3-6). He was a man therefore of exemplary Christian character and ministry. We get a glimpse into the Christ-centered focus of his ministry when he responded to the Ethiopian Eunuch’s question. It is recorded that, *“Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, **preached Jesus to him**”* (Acts 8:35).

Apollos’ was mentored by Aquilla and Priscilla and then commended by the church in Ephesus to preach and minister to the churches in Achaia. His preaching ministry is then described as “greatly helping” those in Achaia (Acts 18:24-27). What was the focus of his preaching that would result in such help for God’s people? He was *“showing from the scriptures that Jesus is the Christ”* (v.28).

Wherever preaching, teaching or testifying is described in Acts, Christ is central. Preaching that is not Christ-centered contradicts the pattern of Acts.

5. Christ-centered preaching is mandated because of the explicit testimony and instructions of the Apostle Paul.

Paul testifies that he would not be diverted from Christ-centered preaching by attempting to persuade men using man’s wisdom. *“For Christ did not send me to Baptize but to preach the Gospel, not with wisdom of words lest the cross of Christ*

should be made of no effect” (1 Cor. 1:17; cp. also 2 Cor. 2:1-3). His mention of not preaching with ‘wisdom of words’ refers in the context to Greek philosophies and human wisdom (1:20-22). The phrase “made of no effect” is from the Greek word *κενόω* which means “to be emptied.” It is used of Christ, who, while on earth emptied or divested Himself of the privileges and honor that was rightfully His (Phil. 2:6). The preaching of the Cross is God’s power to save His people (1 Cor. 1:23). Preaching that is not Christ-centered but focused on man’s wisdom or human cleverness is **preaching that is divested or emptied of its power to save. Paul makes it clear that Christ-centered preaching is not optional but essential to any ministry that will experience the power of God.**

Paul again testifies to the centrality of Christ in his preaching when he says, “*For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord*” (2 Cor. 4:5). In this context, He had just described the Satanic blindness that keeps people from understanding the gospel and perceiving the “glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (v.4). What is God’s ordained means for counteracting Satanic blindness and bringing people to salvation? It is Christ-centered preaching. Preaching that declares plainly and authoritatively the person and work of Christ and its implications. Paul’s preaching was Christ-centered even though he knew his sophisticated Greek hearers would consider it foolish. He preached an anti-seeker sensitive message! He did so, knowing it was God’s ordained message to bring those called had called to salvation (1 Cor. 1:23).

Preaching that is not Christ-centered contradicts Paul’s testimony and instruction and renders divests preaching of its divinely intended power to save.

6. Christ-centered preaching is mandated because Christ preached the sufficiency of Himself for His people!

When Jesus preached at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19), he read from Isaiah 61:1-2. In this passage the coming Messiah would “*heal the brokenhearted*” and thus be sufficient to comfort His people in the midst of any emotional pain. He would “*proclaim release to the captives*”, and thus be sufficient to free his people from the bondage of the guilt and power of sin

with all of its enslaving habits. He would also “*free those who are downtrodden*”. This word means ‘broken into pieces’ and is used in Mark 14:3 of a woman breaking open her vial of perfume. Thus, the Messiah would be sufficient to repair even the most broken and traumatized lives of his people. After reading this passage Jesus sat down and said, “*Today this prophecy is fulfilled in your hearing*”. He was proclaiming Himself to be Messiah and thus the only one sufficient to meet every need of His people.

Jesus points to Himself as the source of His people’s peace, love and joy even in the midst of their most troublesome circumstances (John 14:1-3; 15:10-11). He Himself is their life (Col. 3:4), righteousness, sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). His presence in them is the only basis for their holy living (Gal. 2:20). Jesus makes it abundantly, almost shockingly clear that apart from Him there is not even the remote possibility of our bearing fruit (John 15:5). This fruit refers not only to godly character but good works that result in changing others’ lives (see context of John 14:1-2, 12; 15:7-8).

Therefore to not preach Christ is to inadvertently lead God’s people away from Christ, the source of their satisfaction and sufficiency.

Chapter Three

WHAT *DIFFERENCE* DOES IT MAKE IF PREACHING IS NOT CHRIST-CENTERED?

Preaching that is NOT Christ-centered has catastrophic consequences for Christians and non-Christians. If it does not point to Christ as the only means of our standing with God and godly living it is sub-Christian even though its message comes from the Bible. Christ's name can be invoked in a sermon that actually points people away from Christ! Chapell illustrates this point well:

Unless we identify the redemptive purposes of a text, it is possible to say all the right words and yet send all the wrong signals. I witness this miscommunication almost daily as the top-rated radio station in our city broadcasts a "meditation" during the early morning. In each meditation, the preacher addresses a topic with a Bible verse or two. The subjects run the gamut from procrastination to care for children to honesty on the job. The station turns up the reverberation during the inspirational minute so that it sounds as though the words come directly from Mount Sinai. Not to pay attention seems like a sin. As the speaker reminds us to practice punctuality, good parenting, and business propriety, I imagine thousands of listening Christians are nodding their heads and saying in unison, "That's right . . . that's how we should live."

I have played tapes of these meditations to seminary classes and asked if anyone can discern error. Rarely does anyone spot a problem. The speaker quotes from the Bible accurately, he advocates moral causes, and he encourages loving behaviors. Thus, students are usually astonished when I point out that the radio preacher is not a Christian. He actually represents a large cult located in our region.

How can this be? How can so many Christians... readily grant assent to one whose commitments are radically anti-Christian? Some answer that their lack of protest results from the radio preacher's care to avoid saying

anything controversial. They contend that he hides his heresy beneath a veil of right-sounding orthodoxy. Such defenses miss the point . . . **The radio speaker has not hidden his heresy; he exposes it every time he speaks by what is missing from his message. . .**

A message that merely advocates morality and compassion remains sub-Christian even if the preacher can prove that the Bible demands such behavior. By ignoring the sinfulness of humankind, which makes even our best works tainted before God (Isa. 64:6; Luke 17:10), and by neglecting the grace of God, which makes obedience possible and acceptable (1 Cor. 15:10; Eph. 2:8-9), such messages necessarily subvert the Christian message.¹¹

Preaching that is not Christ-centered is indeed sub-Christian and leaves its Christian hearers attempting to live the Christian life without Christ, and leaves its non-Christians hearers assuming they are Christians simply because they strive to obey his commands.

Conclusion

There is not only a clear biblical case for Christ-centered preaching, there is a crisis in the church without it. This is not a matter of homiletical bantering about preaching styles. This is a life and death matter. Preaching that is not Christ-centered not only disobeys and dishonors Christ, it leads Christians to fields without food and wells without water! Christ alone claims to be the bread of life (John 6:35) and bids “all who thirst to come to *Me* and drink” (John 7:37). To preach otherwise *dishonors* Christ and *disables* Christians. Christ is dishonored when He is removed from *His place of centrality*, Christians are disabled when He is removed as *their source of sufficiency*

It is in light of the critical importance of Christ-centered preaching, Paul implored pastors to never waver by appealing to their highest possible accountability. May the Lord help us to heed His words:

“I Charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom:

Preach the Word!”

2 Timothy 4:1-2

Footnotes

- 1 Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999) 1,2.
- 2 Greidanus, 1
- 3 Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching, Redeeming the Expository Sermon* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005) 277.
- 4 Jay E. Adams, *Preaching with Purpose: A Comprehensive Textbook on Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 147.
- ⁵ Michael Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 2002), 117.
- 6 John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1990), 32.
- 7 Piper, 30
- 8 Bryan Chapell, , 276.
- 9 Chapell, 283.
- 10 Steven J. Lawson, *Famine in the Land: an urgent call to expository Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 36.
- 11 Chapell, 273-274

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