Him We Proclaim: Defining and Defending Apostolic Homiletics
By Dennis E. Johnson, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

Dr. Dennis Johnson gave two lectures at the annual Preaching Conference sponsored by Westminster Theological Seminary (Pennsylvania) on October 20, 2010. His topic was apostolic, Christocentric homiletics. WSC’s blog, Valiant for Truth, published the lectures as a blog series in September through December of 2011. Below is the entire series in three parts: 1) Defining Apostolic Homiletics, 2) Defending Apostolic Homiletics, and 3) Strategies for Apostolic Homiletics. The last section is an Appendix on the broader covenant structure of the Covenant of Redemption.

Introduction

Him We Proclaim: Defining and Defending Apostolic, Christocentric Homiletics

Thank you for the opportunity to think with you about how we can follow in the apostles’ footsteps in our study of God’s Word and our proclamation of its life-giving message. The Apostle Paul summed up the theme and aim of his preaching as he wrote to the Colossians about his preaching:

… stewardship from God… to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, [admonishing] everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone [perfect] in Christ. (Col. 1:25-28)

My goal is to do two things briefly but, I hope, persuasively—or at least to stimulate your reflection about what Christ-centered preaching, as the apostles did it, sounds like; whether we should follow their lead; and (if so), how we might go about preaching the whole Bible as Peter and Paul did. So I will:

- first define and briefly defend what I have cumbersomely described as “apostolic Christocentric homiletics”, and then
- identify structures and strategies that help us follow the apostles’ lead with integrity.

When terms such as “redemptive-historical” or “Christocentric” preaching are used in our circles, they evoke mixed responses of attraction and suspicion.

On the one hand, we just heard Paul sum up his own preaching as proclaiming Christ and our own hearts have been captured by God’s grace in his Son. So we are attracted to the prospect leading others from every Scripture and through every Scripture to Jesus, the only mediator between God and his human creatures.

On the other hand, we have heard or read preaching that flies under the flag of “Christ-centered” or “redemptive-historical” that makes us suspicious:

- It disregarded the evident sense of a biblical text in its original context;
- Or it drew questionable links between a passage’s distinctive message in its “near context,” on the one hand, and the redemptive mission of Christ, on the other;
• Or it presented a stimulating intellectual exercise in intertextual interrelationships but never connected with the real spiritual struggles of real people.

Almost 25 years ago Dr. Henry Krabbendam, thinking (I suppose) of the debate over redemptive-historical versus exemplaristic preaching that raged in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands before World War II, used this vivid metaphor:

...preaching in the redemptive-historical tradition is often comparable to a ride in a Boeing 747 high above the landscape with its hot deserts, its snowpeaked mountains, its wide rivers, its dense forests, its open prairies, its craggy hills and its deep lakes. The view is panoramic, majestic, impressive, breathtaking, and always comfortable. But there is one problem. The Christian is not ‘above’ things. He is in the middle of things. He is trekking through the landscape. As such he is experiencing heat, or cold, or pain, or failure. (“Hermeneutics and Preaching,” 235)

Just last year Dr. Jason Hood published a sympathetic but cautionary response to Christ-centered biblical interpretation in the Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology (“Christ-Centred Interpretation Only?” 50-69). He called attention to the fact that the New Testament authors do, in fact, at times, draw inferences for Christians’ behavior from the Hebrew Scriptures. Consequently he questioned whether the recent surge of interest in Christ-centered hermeneutics and homiletics (stimulated by the influence of Ed Clowney, Timothy Keller, Bryan Chapell, Michael Horton, Sidney Greidanus, Graeme Goldsworthy, and others) runs the risk of ignoring the apostles’ use of Old Testament (OT) texts to reinforce moral exhortation.

Some years back, one of my own colleagues in practical theology as leading a homiletics practicum in which a student preacher, zealous to distance himself from that horrible four-letter word, “moralism,” assured his hearers that Ephesians 5:22-33 has nothing whatever to do with how Christian wives and husbands should treat each other, but rather is all about—and only about—Christ’s redemptive sacrifice for his bride, the church.

So my intent in tacking “apostolic” on to “Christocentric” is simply to say that in preaching Christ from all the Scriptures, we should be following the apostles’ hermeneutical and homiletical lead as we actually find it in the New Testament, both in their central focus on Christ and in the diversity of ways in which they relate the Old Testament and their own pastoral concerns to that center point. Dr. Krabbendam is right: Christians walk earth’s rugged terrain rather than flying turbulence-free above the clouds. Apostolic Christ-centered preaching as I find it in the New Testament (NT) is “down-to-earth.” And I agree with Dr. Hood that the New Testament’s use of the Old includes hortatory and cautionary lessons drawn from the experience of the people God of old. So I want to discern more deeply how the apostles related those moral lessons to the centrality of Christ. We are on shaky ground if we embrace a form of Christ-centered redemptive-historical preaching that is defined so narrowly that we end up disapproving of the ways that the New Testament authors themselves handled Israel’s ancient Scriptures!

**Him We Proclaim: Defining Apostolic Homiletics**

Let’s start by sketching what apostolic Christocentric, redemptive-historical interpretation and proclamation of the Bible looks like, as we see it exemplified in the New Testament—not only in the sermons such as we find summarized in the Acts of the Apostles and the “word of exhortation” that we call the epistle to the Hebrews (13:22; see Acts 13:15). I am also thinking of Paul’s use of Scripture in his epistles, because Paul’s insistence that his message is consistent, whether delivered
in person or by correspondence, gives us reason to expect that his interpretation the Scriptures in his letters was consistent with his use of the Old Testament in face-to-face preaching. And, since the written Gospels had their roots in the spoken gospel, I would include the use of the OT as we find it embedded in the narrative and teaching material found in the good news according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The definition (or description) that I have to offer comes in a series of contrasts between what Christ-centered preaching is sometimes said to be and what the New Testament shows us to be the actual practice of the apostles—which I will henceforth call, “apostolic homiletics,” asking you to understand that apostolic homiletics—that is, their preaching—is grounded in and therefore includes “apostolic hermeneutics”—that is, their principles and practices of interpreting the Bible.

1. Apostolic homiletics is not allegorical ingenuity that disregards a biblical text’s message in its original literary and historical contexts for the sake of “importing” into ancient Scriptures as much later theological detail as possible.

Rather, apostolic homiletics treasures the historically-progressive character of God’s special revelation, recognizes the limitations of an ancient scripture’s original historical and theological horizons, and then highlights our privileged perspective as those who live in “the last days,” when shadows have given way to fulfillment-realities.

We may smile as we read Augustine’s creative exposition of how “the Ark Which Noah Was Ordered to Make Figures In Every Respect Christ and the Church” (City of God, 15.26): its wood, its dimensions (those of the human body, its length 6 times its breadth and 10 times its thickness—which shows that the ark prefigures Jesus’ crucified body as well as the church as the “body of Christ”), the door in its side prefiguring the spear wound in Christ’s side, the squared timbers symbolizing the steadiness of the saints, the three stories representing Jews and Gentiles and...or, well, perhaps the whole of humanity descending from Noah’s three sons, or else faith, hope and charity, or else the threefold gospel harvest in the parable of the Sower (30, 60, 100 fold), or else the three states of chastity—marriage on the ground floor, widowhood above that, and virginity, of course, on top. Whatever became of the historical/literary/theological horizons of Genesis itself and of Moses’ generation?

We do not find the apostles handling the Old Testament text in this a-contextual or anti-contextual way—not even in Galatians 4:21-31, that singular text in which Paul uses the Greek verb ἀλληγορέω from which we get our English term “allegory”. Admittedly, there the apostle draws many connections between Abraham’s two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, on the one hand, and the alternative avenues to Abraham’s blessing that confront his Galatian readers—either Torah-observance or faith in Jesus. The sons and their mothers stand for two covenants, old and new, associated with distinct mountains or cities. The outcomes of those covenants are signified in the status of the mothers, slavery or freedom, and in their respective sons’ exclusion or inheritance. The sons’ conceptions were traceable either to “the flesh”— resources within human control—or to "the Spirit”—dependence on God’s power to act in life-giving power beyond human capacities.

Appropriate humility would encourage us to be cautious about drawing as many links as Paul does here between particulars of Old Testament events and their New Testament fulfillment. But at the heart of Paul’s argument is in a contextually-faithful reading of the Ishmael-Isaac narrative in Genesis. The issue, in the life of Abraham and in the lives of the ancient Israelites, really had to do with two alternative routes to the fulfillment of God’s promise of blessing. One remedy devised by
Abraham and Sarah—Hagar’s pregnancy as a surrogate mother for her mistress Sarah—was a solution that lay within the reach of human resources—that is, the flesh. The other was utter dependence on God’s power to create life in Sarah’s dead womb—a prospect that lay beyond the limits of creaturely possibility: nothing but the Spirit of God could bring life in such circumstances. In the Genesis context, then, the alternatives of flesh and Spirit are visible in seed form, as are their outcomes: slavery and expulsion, or freedom and inheritance.

Hebrews 4:6-8 offers an example of a NT author paying special attention to the original historical-theological context and horizon of an Old Testament passage. The preacher wants us to know that Psalm 95, in its original redemptive historical setting, was retrospective. It looked back to the unbelief of Israel’s wilderness generation. The Psalm did so from a period “long afterward,” in the era of David’s rule. In that later time period, God was still addressing his people “today,” summoning them to persevering faith, lest they be excluded from his rest. That threat of failing to enter God’s rest implied that in the conquest Joshua had not achieved the “rest” envisioned in this Psalm. Despite statements in the book of Joshua that “the Lord gave them rest on every side” (Josh. 21:44; 22:4), even in David’s day, long after the conquest, still Psalm 95 summoned the people of God to look ahead to another “rest of God,” yet to be entered by persevering faith. The “location” of Psalm 95 in the history of redemption and revelation is crucial to our understanding of “the rest of God” that it offers to those who hear his voice “today.”

Nuanced and responsible advocates of Christ-centered, redemptive-historical preaching in recent decades have emphasized the importance of attending carefully first to a text’s import in its original historical and literary setting, and then to its placement in the unfolding progress of biblical revelation. Edmund Clowney, in his first significant work on the subject, Preaching and Biblical Theology, devoted the fourth chapter to the content of preaching, discussing first the interpretation of each text “in the light of the historical horizon in which it is found,” and then “in God’s total revelation” (89-112). Likewise, Sidney Greidanus in Preaching Christ from the Old Testament, maps out the Christocentric method in terms of two steps: First, we must understand the passage in its own historical context. Then, we go on to understand the message in the contexts of canon and redemptive history (228-234). Biblical contexts rightly curb our creativity and must control our interpretation and proclamation!

2. Apostolic homiletics is not a Trinity-ignoring Christomonism.

Rather, apostolic homiletics is robustly Trinitarian: its focus on Christ as the divine executor of the Father’s creational purpose and as the divine-human mediator of the covenant of grace increases our appreciation for the engagement of the Father and the Spirit in the great works of creation, providence, and redemption.

The apostles and other inspired authors of the New Testament do not focus our attention on Christ the Son at the expense of God the Father, nor at the expense of the Holy Spirit.

Rather, they emphasize that the Father sent the Son to accomplish his mission of redemption, reconciliation, and re-creation. The sending of the Son, and especially the giving of his life on the cross, demonstrate the dimensions of God the Father’s love toward his human creatures (John 3:16; Romans 5:8). Through the mediatorial work of the Son we have access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:18). The Son and the Father reveal one another to the people of God, as Jesus’ complementary sayings in Matthew 11 and 16 show:
Matthew 11:27: "... No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Matthew 16:16-17: Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

Likewise, the New Testament’s focus on Christ and his mediatorial work does not minimize the majesty or the ministry of the Spirit of God, whose indwelling presence applies Christ’s redemptive achievement with life-generating power to human hearts. The Spirit testifies to the Son.

John 16:13-15: But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears...He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.

By the Spirit’s presence the risen Christ makes good his promises not to leave us orphans (John 14:18), never to leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5), and to be with us all the days until the consummation of this age (Matt. 28:20).

Is it possible for Christ-centered preachers to get “off-center,” so preoccupied with the Son (whom the apostles saw in flesh and blood) that we neglect the Father who sent him (whom no one has seen nor can see—1 Tim. 6:16; John 1:18) or the unseen divine Spirit who opens our eyes to the Father’s glory displayed in the Son? Yes, it is.

But that imbalance is not the apostles’ fault: they introduce us to the Son specifically because he is the way, truth, and life who leads to the Father (John 14:6-10)—and because the enthroned Son bestows the Spirit in power among his people (Acts 2:33), and through the Spirit’s quiet and invincible presence “walks among the candlesticks” as the living and reigning Son of Man (Rev. 1:12-13; 2:7; etc.).

3. Apostolic homiletics does not assume that every text testifies to Christ in the same way.

Rather, apostolic homiletics exhibits various ways in which the Old Testament’s diverse genres and texts diagnosed humanity’s need for restoration to true knowledge, reconciliation for holy communion, and rescue and rule in righteousness. And apostolic homiletics show the various ways in which the coming of the supreme Prophet, Priest, and King was anticipated, promised, and foreshadowed in the era of promise.

A couple of years ago Pastor Joshua Buice, writing in his blog, “deliveredbygrace.com,” expressed reservations about Christ-centered preaching. He spoke for many, I suspect, when he wrote:

I do not hold to a strict Christocentric view that claims that Jesus Christ is in every Old Testament passage. For instance, I do not see Christ in Psalm 32:1 “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” If Christ is in every passage as some claim, that means that Jesus is the man who had His sins forgiven! We know that is an impossibility since He never committed a single sin.
While I do not believe that Christ is in each passage and I do not believe that the human author intended Him to appear in each passage, what I do know is that He is the fulfillment of all Scripture. For instance, in Psalm 32:1 above, Christ is not the man who has committed sin, but He is the One that provides the forgiveness to us who have committed sin. Rather than pointing to each Old Testament passage and claiming that He is present in each text as a type or prophecy—He is the ultimate fulfillment. (July 10, 2008)

What I find intriguing about Pastor Buice’s comment on Psalm 32:1 is that he actually did find Christ in that verse, after all. He even found Christ precisely where I would find him: as the divine Provider of forgiveness to the man whose trespass is covered. That is Paul’s point in quoting this Psalm in Romans 4:7-9: Abraham believed the God who justifies the ungodly, and God blessed Abraham with an imputed righteousness, reckoned to the patriarch’s credit with the forgiveness of his lawless deeds (4:1-6). How could God remain the just judge and at the same time the justifier of ungodly people? He justifies those who have faith in Jesus (3:26). And why faith in Jesus? Because, as Paul had said earlier, the righteousness of God comes “by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood” (3:21-24).

So in the flow of his argument in Romans 3 and 4, Paul has shown us that Christ is “in” Psalm 32:1 not as the sinner needing or receiving forgiveness, but rather as the atoning sacrifice provided by God the Father.

Since Pastor Buice feels that proclaiming Christ as the source of David’s forgiveness in Psalm 32 is not Christ-centered preaching, I suspect that he has been exposed to a one-dimensional way of connecting Old Testament texts, events, persons, offices, and institutions to their fulfillment in Christ and his new covenant people. Yet those who have reflected on how the New Testament interprets the Old in eschatological-Christological terms are more nuanced. To take just two examples:

• Bryan Chapell, author of Christ-Centered Preaching, offers three general categories of relationships between biblical passages and Christ as Scripture’s integrating center:

  o Text Disclosure—“a text may make a direct reference to Christ or to an aspect of his messianic work”
  o Type Disclosure—“the study of the correspondences between persons, events, and things that first appear in the Old Testament to preview, prepare, or more fully express New Testament salvation truths.”
  o Context Disclosure—“by identifying where a passage fits in the overall revelation of God’s redemptive plan the preacher relates that text to Christ by performing the standard and necessary task of establishing its context.” Under this “context” category he offers further subdivisions:

    • Predictive
    • Preparatory—diagnosing needs that only Christ could meet
    • Reflective—What does this text reflect of:

      • God’s nature that provides the ministry of Christ;
      • And/or human nature that requires the ministry of Christ?
• Resultant—guiding the believing, thankful, loving response that flows from the redemptive grace of God in Christ

Sidney Greidanus, author of *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, suggests seven ways of connecting the text’s message in its original, closest contexts to its place in the larger contexts of the entire biblical canon and the whole sweep of God’s redemptive plan for history:

- Redemptive-historical progression
- Promise-fulfillment
- Typology
- Analogy
- Longitudinal themes
- New Testament references
- Contrast

The apostles’ handling of Old Testament texts sensitizes us to a variety of ways in which the different eras, events, individuals, and themes throughout the Bible flow toward their focal point in Jesus the Messiah. In our second lecture we will explore this variety a bit further, viewing Christ’s covenantal roles as Lord and Servant and his mediatorial roles as prophet, priest, and king.

4. **Apostolic homiletics** does not merely *exhort* hearers to imitate Jesus as example (turning Gospel indicatives into dutiful imperatives). Nor does apostolic homiletics let hearers *merely contemplate* Christ’s once-for-all redemptive accomplishment without responding in a living faith that expresses itself in obedience (savoring Scripture’s indicatives while discarding its imperatives).

   Rather, apostolic homiletics proclaims Jesus’ unique and *inimitable* redemptive achievement on our behalf, *for the sake of calling us to faith*, and then *calling us to Christ-like love and living* in gratitude for grace and assurance of the Father’s favor.

I have no doubt that 19th century social gospel classics such as Charles Sheldon’s novel, *In His Steps*, as well as 20th century evangelical youth fads like WWJD, were motivated by a desire to be Christ-centered after a fashion. As the allusion to 1 Peter 2:21 in Sheldon’s title implies, there is biblical warrant for summoning people to the imitation of Christ, to “follow in his steps.” Moreover, as Dr. Hood’s recent essay shows, the New Testament authors do draw moral lessons for Christians’ conduct from the positive and the negative examples recorded in the Old Testament history, from Noah’s ark-building faith to Lot’s wife, and from Israel’s unbelief in the desert to the prophets’ pious prayers.

But we are not reading and preaching the Scriptures as the apostles have shown us to do when we *reduce* Old Testament narratives to morality-inducing tales, such as we might find in William
Bennett’s *Book of Virtues*. To read Old Testament narratives (or, for that matter, the Gospels and Acts or the hortatory sections of New Testament epistles) solely for the sake of distilling duties and life lessons is to remove these passages from their most significant context, their place and role in the unfolding story of God’s gracious covenant bond with his undeserving people. As they preach the Scriptures, the apostles do not distill and retain the imperatives for our response, while *disregarding the indicatives* of God’s saving initiative.

On the other hand, the apostles do not distill and retain the indicatives, the good news of God’s redemptive achievement in Christ, only to *discard or dismiss the imperative implications* that direct our response to this gospel. As Paul said in Colossians 1:28, the goal of proclaiming Christ is to “present everyone perfect in Christ.” The goal is not only forensic (forgiveness and vindication—the two aspects of justification) but also relational (reconciliation and adoption) and transformational (sanctification in motive, thought, word, and deed).

The epistle to the Hebrews provides a striking example of the marshalling of a rich redemptive-historical exposition of the Old Testament as foreshadowing fulfillment in Christ for the purpose of motivating Christian believers to faithful living in community. The preacher calls his document “the word of exhortation” (*tou logou tēs paraklēseōs*) (13:22). “Word of exhortation” not only implies that it is an ancient sermon in written form. It also highlights “exhortation” or “encouragement” as the central task that this document is designed to perform. It exhorts believers to exhort each other daily to persevere in faith (Heb. 3:13; 10:25) and calls attention to the “strong encouragement” (*paraklēsis*) that God provides to believers through his unchangeable oath-bound promise (Heb. 6:18; cf. also 12:5). In each of the six “movements” in the sermon’s theological argument for the superiority of the new covenant to the old—showing Jesus’ superiority to angels, Moses, Aaron, the animal sacrifices of the tabernacle, the earthly promised land, and the terrible glories of Mount Sinai—the exegetical and theological argument is *directed toward a hortatory section* that urges the hearers to respond appropriately to the privilege that is now theirs in Jesus. These exhortations are not interruptions to a pristine theological discussion. Rather, they are the *intended goal* of the theological and exegetical argument that Hebrews is building for the superiority of Jesus and the salvific order that he has brought. As Dr. Richard Gaffin has written,

---

2 Twice the author explicitly states that he is “exhorting” (*parakaleō*) his hearers (Heb. 13:19, 22). He also expresses many of his commands to its hearers as *hortatory subjunctives* (first person plurals, in which the speaker obligates himself along with his hearers) rather than second person imperatives (e.g., 4:1, 11, 14; 6:1; 10:19-25). Second person imperatives are also used, however, to convey the hearers’ obligation (e.g., 3:12-13), as is the construction “it is necessary to…” (Greek *dei* + infinitive) (2:1).
4 Contra Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews: Christ Above All* (The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1982): “This parenthesis [2:1-4] deals with the gospel of God. It is the logical outcome of the author’s insistence on the superiority of Christ…. In this parenthesis the writer reminds us of the Christian revelation in the gospel….” Regarding 5:11ff, Brown comments (p. 103): “So [the author] *digresses* to discuss three closely related spiritual problems confronting some of his readers.” (emphasis added)
“It is misleading to view Hebrews basically as an apologetic-polemic treatment of the person and work of Christ and the superiority of the new covenant to the old, to which various imperatives have been appended in a secondary fashion…. Hebrews does provide profound and extensive teaching, especially in the areas of Christology and soteriology, but it does that only ‘in solution’ with application, only as the parenetic element is pervasive and shapes the course of the argument as a whole.”

Hebrews calls its hearers not only to persevering trust in Jesus, but also to peace and sexual purity (12:14-17; 13:4), to hospitality, to generosity, to contentment (13:2, 5-6), to patient endurance of suffering (12:3-11), and to other actions flowing from faith.

So, on the one hand, apostolic preaching is not ethical imperative ungrounded in theological indicative. But, on the other hand, apostolic preaching is not merely theological contemplation, which stops short of challenging and changing its hearers’ values, affections, allegiance, and behavior. The apostolic New Testament authors did not assume that they had done their duty and finished the job when they had only announced the gospel's indicatives. They did not assume that the Holy Spirit would magically show their hearers how to respond to the majestic truths they had proclaimed. Rather, they saw themselves as the pastoral means by which Christ would show his sheep the shape of their grateful response to his saving grace.

5. Apostolic homiletics does not assume that the Christocentric fulfillment of all the Scriptures is focused exclusively in the atonement.

*Rather,* apostolic homiletics presents Jesus the anointed as achieving a comprehensive redemption not only from sin's guilt and penalty but also from sin's tyrannical control, from sin's conscience-defiling influence, from sin's mind-darkening deception, and eventually from all of sin's toxic byproducts—including death itself.

Christ's cross and resurrection are the center of the Bible’s Christological center, the essential and irreducible core of the gospel. Paul reminded the Corinthian church that the gospel—that Christ died according to the Scriptures, was buried, was raised the third day according to the Scriptures and was seen alive by many witnesses—is not only what he preached initially to them as “of first importance,” but also the foundation on which they continue to “stand” and through which their salvation would be completed (1 Cor. 15:1-4ff).

The source of the entire complex of “sin and misery” into which our Fall in Adam has plunged us is that we are rebels who have broken covenant with our Creator. Thus we stand alienated from him who is the very source of life and condemned under his curse. We need reconciliation, and nothing less than the blood of the Son of God can make peace between us and the King whom we have offended. We need a great high priest who can present that atoning sacrifice.

But we are also dead in trespasses and sins, and nothing less than the resurrection life of God’s Son, conveyed by his Holy Spirit, can bring us back from the dead (Eph. 2:1-7).

---

We are also deluded, our thinking “darkened in understanding” in “the futility of our minds.” Left to ourselves, we are deceived by Satan and others and ourselves, preferring illusions and lies to the truth of God. We need the renewing of our minds. We need a Prophet who is God’s Word and truth, to shine divine light into our confusion and delusion, to put us in touch with reality.

Left to ourselves, we are vulnerable and enslaved, captive to “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:1-2). The mighty Champion Jesus has come to share our flesh and blood in order to destroy the devil who had the power of death (Heb. 2:14) and set us free. Yet we are still under attack by “the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic power over this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). We need a King of kings who takes up arms to defend us and who abounds in justice and wisdom to rule and direct us.

Christ-centered preaching begins at the cross and the empty tomb, and it works out from there to display to us the comprehensiveness of Jesus’ reconciling, re-creating, revealing, image-of-God-restoring, kingdom-of-God-establishing mission.

**Him We Proclaim: Defending Apostolic Homiletics**

In this venue it would be beside the point to attempt an academic defense of the apostles’ interpretive methods against the critiques of historical-critical scholars who demonstrate a presuppositional bias against the Scriptures’ claim to be the word of God written. In the disciplines of biblical studies, others—including, in a noteworthy way, Dr. Gregory Beale at Westminster Theological Seminary—have ably responded to those assaults on the New Testament's interpretation of the Old.

Here I am talking to preachers and preachers-in-preparation, assuming that you bow before the Bible as God’s inerrant Word, which must control not only the “what” of our preaching, but also the “how” of our preaching. So I offer just three arguments for reading and preaching the Bible like Peter and Paul—but arguments that to my mind are decisive:

**1. Because Christ is the overarching theme of apostolic preaching, he must be the overarching theme of our preaching.**

Paul’s discussions of his own apostolic mission and ministry priorities provide an inspired “pastoral theology” that directs our service as preachers. As we heard in Colossians 1:28, Paul sums up his preaching ministry in a sentence that is rich and brim-full of meaning: “Him [Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” Paul proclaims Christ because at Christ’s glorious return Paul wants to present people perfect in Christ.

Often in his epistles Paul replaced terms that describe the message—“gospel” or “word of God”—with the personal name of Christ. In 1 Corinthians Paul contrasted his message to the motifs of power that his Jewish hearers preferred and of wisdom that suited Greek tastes:

1 Cor. 1:23-24 – ... we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
1 Cor. 1:29-31 – No human being may boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

1 Cor. 2:2 – I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

We hear the same Christ-centered priority in the opening and the closing of Romans, the magisterial epistle by which Paul introduced his apostolic calling and his gospel to the thriving church in the imperial capital. In the opening (Rom. 1:1-6) he speaks of his call to proclaim “the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son … Jesus Christ our Lord.” His closing doxology (16:25-27) speaks of “… my gospel and the preaching [about] Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations….”

Later, writing to the church at Philippi, Paul reported that his captivity had emboldened others to “speak the word” (Phil. 1:14). Then he granted that some “preach Christ” (notice that!) from motives of envy and competition, assuming that their success will frustrate the apostle (1:15). Though their motives were poor, their message was true, for Paul again mentions that they “proclaim Christ” (1:17) and affirms that he rejoices when “in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed” (1:18).

To the church at Ephesus, Paul describes his privilege as a herald appointed by the living God, “to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things…. (Eph. 3:8-10). In fact, for Paul “Christ” sums up not only the message that reconciles Jews and Gentiles to their Creator, but also the pattern of Christian living that flows from faith in response to grace.

In Ephesians 4 he has made his typical transition from indicative to imperative, from unfolding the gospel to profiling the changes that need to occur in believers’ daily lives and relationships. In Eph. 4:18-19 he reminds the Ephesian believers of their sordid past in pagan sensuality. But he turns the corner at 4:20:

Eph. 4:20-21 – But that is not the way you learned Christ! – assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, that you have put off the old man, corrupted through desires of deceit, and are being renewed, having put on the new man, created after the likeness of God in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

Under this rubric, Paul goes on to say that “truth in Jesus”—our break with the old man Adam and union with the new man Christ—must be expressed in “taking off” lies and telling the truth, “taking off” theft and working to share, “taking off” corrosive speech and speaking gracious words that build others.

So Paul was no stranger to the pressure to “expand” his sermonic repertoire, to include other themes besides Christ in order to deal more adequately with human problems—just as we today face pressures to deliver a message aligned to the spirit of the age. Judaizers at Galatia were sure that Paul’s gospel of Christ’s cross needed to be supplemented by a healthy dose of law, if unwashed pagans were ever to put defiling ways behind them. Intellectual sophisticates at Corinth were embarrassed by Paul’s fixation on Christ and him crucified—too weak for those who wanted
political action and influence, too foolish for the intelligentsia whose appetites preferred an elegant answer to humanity's quandaries. Mystics at Colosse sought to move beyond the physical realities of incarnation and a public execution, craving visionary experience that moved them into the "in crowd," the illuminati.

But Paul’s message stayed the same—“Him we proclaim”—because, as he says a few sentences later to the Colossians, Christ is the one “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:2-3).

2. Because Christ is the overarching theme of Israel’s Scriptures, as well as the New Testament, we want our preaching to do for Jesus what God intends the Bible to do for Jesus: namely, to direct faith to him as the only mediator between God and man.

Luke 24 describes Bible studies that the risen Lord Jesus conducted with his closest disciples in the aftermath of his resurrection. The two encounters that we read in that chapter—first the conversation between two disciples traveling to Emmaus and the as-yet-unrecognized Jesus, and later his instruction of the assembled apostles in Jerusalem—form the "hinge" between Luke’s "volume one" (which we call his Gospel) and Luke’s "volume two" (the Book of Acts). Here is the climax of “all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day he was taken up” to heaven (as Luke describes it in the first verses of Acts). These post-resurrection, pre-ascension Bible studies provide the hermeneutical foundation for the life-transforming preaching that we hear in the Book of Acts. Listen to the relevant sentences in verses 25-27, and then verses 44-49:

Luke 24:25-27: [Jesus to two disciples en route to Emmaus:] "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Luke 24:44-49: [Later, in Jerusalem, to a larger group of disciples:] “Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus is it written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

Notice the span of the Old Testament canon to which Jesus directed the disciples’ attention: To the two on the road to Emmaus, Jesus expounds Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and all the Prophets—in the Hebrew Scriptures, "the Prophets" include the historical books: not only Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the minor prophets, but also the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. Later, to the larger group, Jesus interprets the things about himself not only in the Law of Moses and the Prophets, but also in the Psalms—the first book in the third division of the Hebrew canon, the “Writings,” inclusive of the wisdom literature and other assorted documents. So Luke’s summary seems to be a shorthand way of referring to the whole Old Testament: “Genesis to Malachi,” as we would say today.

Also notice (in vv. 45-49) the spectrum of themes in Christ’s redemptive work that Jesus showed his friends from the Old Testament: his suffering, his resurrection, the preaching of repentance and forgiveness in his name to all nations, the role of the apostles as witnesses, and the Father’s promise
of power from on high—fulfilled, we see in Acts, in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. To preach Christ from all the Scriptures is by no means to strum a one-string guitar! It is to show how the many-faceted grace of God radiates in all directions from the beloved eternal Son who became the well-pleasing incarnate Son, was rejected as the curse-bearing Son for others, and now lives and rules as the exalted Son—whose kingdom is expanding to embrace all nations “to the end of the earth.”

Luke 24 does not stand alone as evidence that Jesus and his followers understood the whole Old Testament as pointing to him. In John’s Gospel, for example, we read that Jesus told the experts in the Law of Moses: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:46-47).

First Peter 1:10-12 also speaks of “the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories” as the message announced by the Spirit of Christ through Israel’s prophets.

And to such explicit statements we can add the implicit signals sent by the New Testament’s citations of Old Testament passages as fulfilled in Christ, conveying the message that Christ is the last Adam, seed of Abraham, true Israel, radiant display of divine glory, bread from heaven, watersource in a barren desert, shepherd-king, son of David, fruit-bearing vine, final temple, and so on.

If we intend to expound God’s Word in line with his purpose for giving it, then we will make sure that we are pointing out to our hearers in our congregations how the whole Bible is the Holy Spirit’s bearing witness to Jesus the Son of God and his mission of rescue and redemption—so the Father, Son, and Spirit receive all glory in our preaching and in our hearers’ response to it.

3. Because the Spirit conforms believers to the image of Christ in purity and love by deepening our faith in Christ and grasp of the implications of the gospel, our preaching must fix our hearers’ minds and hearts on the transforming glory of Jesus the Christ.

How can we and our hearers have our hearts transformed into the image of Christ? Through hearing Christ preached! Paul’s aim in preaching was not just to “get people saved,” slipping through heaven’s door by the skin of their teeth. He wanted his hearers to live a life of vibrant, joyful, grateful trust in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. He preached evangelistic sermons to call unbelievers to faith in Jesus, and then he kept right on preaching the same gospel, because he knew that the only way anyone can be presented “perfect” to God is if he or she is “perfect in Christ” (Col. 1:28)—drawing life from Christ, as a branch depends for life on the grapevine to which it is joined.

In the 19th century Thomas Chalmers, pastor and theological professor of the Church of Scotland, preached a classic sermon called “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.” He said that those who want to see people turn away from the world and its sinful and self-destructive appetites, and to pursue holiness of life instead, can follow one of two strategies. One is to try to convince our listeners that sinning is bad for them, that it will let them down and lead to frustration, desperation, and death. This approach, said Chalmers, never really works in the long run, because it only creates a vacuum in the heart, with nothing to fill the void.
What is needed, said Chalmers, is a new affection so strong that it expels the old from our hearts—something so attractive that sin and self-centeredness no longer seem appetizing. Now, asked Chalmers, what “new affection” is strong enough to break our own and our members’ attachment to sin? The grateful love that flows from the gracious work of Christ! The assurance of the Father’s love that is grounded in the gospel puts to rest our fears that God will reject us if we fail to “measure up,” and transforms obedience from mere duty to a delightful opportunity to express our love for the God who first loved us.

To the extent that people go away from our preaching with the impression that God’s approval is contingent on their performance, their relationship with God remains a business transaction in which, consciously or not, they see themselves as trading their best efforts at self-discipline for some reassurance that they have done enough to stay on God’s “good side.” That quid-pro-quo business arrangement, though, can never generate the delight in God and grateful love that outshines the allure of sin. Only the assurance that comes from resting in what Christ has done for us can overwhelm us with love and wonder over his grace, and this will fire our passion for holiness.

In Galatians 3:1-3 Paul insisted—in contradiction to the Judaizers—that the only way for the Gentile believers of Galatia to “be perfected” (ἐπιτελεῖσθαι), to complete the spiritual pilgrimage on which they had set out by trusting the message of Christ crucified, was to stay on that same course: not departing from the dependence on Christ and his Spirit in which they began, not refocusing their reliance on “the flesh,” their efforts and record of Torah-observance. Paul goes on to show why the Judaizers’ formula for spiritual maturity cannot work: it contradicts God’s purpose for the Law of Moses, trying to force the Law to do a task that God did not design it to do: In Galatians 3:21, Paul wrote: “If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law,” implying that the law could never impart the spiritual life that would enable us to fulfill its requirements.

The Law’s impotence, as Law, to instill the life and power of the Spirit into the human heart, is the backdrop of Paul’s victorious announcement in Romans 8:1-4:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

In the first sentence, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” Paul reaffirms the thrust of Romans 3-5, that our justification and assurance are grounded in Jesus, not in ourselves or our efforts. Then Paul develops the implications of justification for sanctification, as he discussed in Romans 6-7, contrasting the liberating power of the Spirit of life to the law’s impotence to break through the syndrome of sin and death: “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.”

What, precisely, could the law not do? (Paul’s Greek is striking, ὁ γὰρ ὁδὸν ὑπόκειται τοῦ νόμου, “the law’s impossible thing.”) The monologue of Romans 7:7-25 had dramatized the reality that the flesh—our sin-disabled human nature, devoid of the Spirit’s life—had weakened the law, so it could not empower the obedience that it defined and demanded (Johnson, "Function of Romans, 3-59).
And the law’s impotence is shown most clearly in what God in fact did through “his own Son,” as Paul says in 8:3-4: First, “by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, [God] condemned sin in the flesh.” Christ’s death as our representative answered sin’s indictment of the guilty (Rom. 3:21-26; 4:24-25) and broke sin’s slavery over its captives (6:1-14). Second, the result produced by the Spirit in believers is expressed in verse 4: “in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” By the Spirit’s powerful presence believers now “walk”—now conduct their lives—controlled by new values, affections, and desires. Paul had said earlier that believers “have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God” (6:22). The cross and the Spirit of Christ, embraced by growing faith and deepening understanding, converge to change motives and desires, and therefore to change words and deeds, in a way that preaching the Law as duty could never achieve.

The result of our freedom from the law as the condition of our acceptance by God is that we begin to find “the law’s righteous requirement fulfilled in us”—not only “on our behalf” (though it is true that Christ kept its every command flawlessly for us), but also in our desires and behavior: Later in Romans (13:8-10) Paul returns to the theme that those who “walk by the Spirit” will see the law fulfilled in their affections and actions:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

The law—whether explicit commandment or moral example—sets the standard for God-pleasing thoughts, words, and actions; but it cannot, in itself, instill the life, love, and hope that move us toward conformity to the image of Christ. If we want our preaching to serve that purpose, the only power that can effect such a new creation is for our hearers to "behold the glory of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18), as we preach Jesus Christ crucified, risen, reigning, and returning.

Conclusion

Not only does Christ-centered preaching fit God’s purpose for the Bible and the apostles’ example, but it is also the means that God uses to effect radical heart transformation. So preaching Christ from all the Scriptures fulfills the purposes of preaching, as the Larger Catechism lists them, “...enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; ... driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; ... conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; ... strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; ... building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation” (A. 155).

Him We Proclaim: Strategies for Apostolic Homiletics

We have talked about the “why” of following the apostles’ lead in preaching Christ from all the Scriptures:

- His divine-human Person and saving mission are the unifying theme of Israel’s ancient Scriptures,
- He is the focus of the apostles’ preaching as new covenant ministers,
• Fixing our hearers’ spiritual gaze on Christ and his glory serves the Holy Spirit’s agenda to conform hearts to the image of God’s Son.

Being persuaded of the “why” is one thing; practicing the “how” is another. That is what we need to investigate now: How can we, should we, read and preach the Bible like Peter and Paul? After all, we are not apostles. We have no special inspiration of the Holy Spirit that secures our inerrancy as interpreters! From that obvious difference between them and us, some conclude that we must not employ the apostles’ interpretive methods to Old Testament texts on which they have not commented. I believe that we should draw just the opposite conclusion: Especially for those passages for which there seems to be no explicit apostolic commentary in the New Testament, wisdom and humility lead us to try to follow in the apostles’ footsteps, rather than abandoning the trails they have blazed. But again, the question is, “How?”

In his sermon on 1 Peter 2:7, “Christ Precious to Believers,” Charles Spurgeon, a master of illustration, told of a young preacher who preached in the presence of a “venerable divine,” and then asked the older pastor what he thought of the sermon. The young man was dismayed to hear it judged “a very poor sermon.” He asked if the lack was in his research, or his selection of text, or his use of argument and metaphor. No, the old preacher said each of those aspects was acceptable. Why, then, was the sermon so poor? Because “there was no Christ in it.” The young man defended himself by contending, “Christ was not in the text; we are not to be preaching Christ always, we must preach what is in the text.” But then his mentor replied:

Don’t you know, young man, that from every town, and every village, and every little hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London?” “Yes,” said the young man. “Ah!” said the old divine, “and so from every text in Scripture, there is a road to the metropolis of the Scriptures, that is Christ. And my dear brother, your business is, when you get to a text, to say, ‘Now what is the road to Christ?’ and then preach a sermon, running along the road towards the great metropolis—Christ. And,” said he, “I have never yet found a text that had not got a road to Christ in it, and if I ever do find one that has not a road to Christ in it, I will make one; I will go over hedge and ditch but I would get at my Master, for the sermon cannot do any good unless there be a saviour of Christ in it.”

Now, I confess that on occasion Brother Spurgeon’s sermons (which, I admit, were more eloquent than mine) strike me as involving hedge climbing and ditch fording, when the Spirit of God has already embedded a clearer and more convincing trail in the landscape of the Bible itself. But, after all, that is the main point of Spurgeon’s story: from every little English hamlet there really is a path, a lane, a road, a highway that leads to London. Find that route that brings you to the capital, to Christ the center of God’s redemptive plan and word.

Today we have excellent resources available to us to help us glimpse the paths that link ancient Scriptures to their fullness in Jesus the Messiah. I think of the often-ignored but invaluable cross references in the margins of our Bibles, or the carefully researched notes and indices in study Bibles and Greek New Testament editions. Or of Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing’s Gospel in the Old Testament series that had its origin in the work Westminster Seminary Professors Raymond Dillard, Tremper Longman, and Alan Groves. Or of the Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament which Professor Greg Beale edited with Dr. Donald Carson (Baker, 2007).

But these resources will not “connect the dots” for us unless we learn to think biblically about biblical interpretation and the history of redemption. We don’t just need data—the kind of data that
a computer word-search program could provide. We need wisdom. We need an apostolic perspective on what the data shows. This is one implication of Luke 24’s accounts of the risen Lord’s Bible studies with his disciples: our minds need to be opened and our foolish, sluggish, unbelieving hearts need to stirred to faith, as the Scriptures are opened to us.

How can we meet Christ on every page of Scripture? My simple answer to this is that we need to pay attention to three things, just as if we were traveling through unfamiliar territory:

1. road signs
2. landmarks
3. the lay of the land

1. Road Signs: Biblical elements and motifs—the apostles sometimes call them “types”—that are plainly identified as finding their focus and fulfillment in Christ and his redemptive work.

Types are clearly labeled directions, like highway markers and Interstate exit signs.

These are flesh-and-blood patterns embedded in real history that show the shape of things to come. Occasionally the New Testament explicitly labels Old Testament individuals, institutions, and events as “types” (Greek tupos). So, for instance, in Romans 5:14 Paul calls Adam “a tupos of the coming One.” The comparisons and contrasts that Paul draws between Adam and Christ in the following verses illustrate what Leon Goppelt called the twin features of biblical typology, “correspondence” and heightening.6 The correspondence lies in the fact that both Adams, first and last, acted on behalf of their people and their decisions determined the status and future of those whom they represented. Now, the “heightening” dimension of apostolic typological interpretation often involves a move from the good to the better in Christ, as we see in Hebrews: God’s speech through prophets was good, but in the Son is better; Moses the faithful servant was good, but Christ the faithful Son is better. But in Romans 5 the “heightening” (if we can call it that) in the move from Adam and Christ is different—the contrast is more extreme. Adam and Christ exercised their role as covenant representative in diametrically opposite ways, with opposite results for their communities: Adam disobeyed, and all who are in Adam receive condemnation and death; Christ obeyed, and all who are in Christ receive righteousness and life. The contrasts between OT types and NT fulfillments are not usually so stark, but there is always, within a consistent pattern, some sort of escalation from bad to good, temporary to eternal, good to better by far.

Even without the “type” label, the apostles and other New Testament authors have posted plain road signs that direct us from ancient patterns to Christological fulfillment. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul explained the compared and contrasted Adam and Christ as he had in Romans 5, but without the “typos”-terminology. Other NT passages connect, for example, the OT sanctuaries—tabernacle and temple—first to the incarnate Son (John 1:14; 2:19-21) and then to the church of living stones that he is constructing by his resurrection power (1 Peter 2:5ff; Eph. 2:20-22). Likewise, both Paul and

the author to the Hebrews present Israel’s *exodus* from slavery and the sentence of death in Egypt, as a flesh-and-blood preview of the greater, deeper, more lasting liberation into which Jesus leads his new Israel (1 Cor. 10; Heb. 3-4).

Actually, the Old Testament prophets themselves typologically interpreted earlier events in the era of promise, as anticipations embedded in history to provide previews of redemption to come. So through Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and other spokesmen God promised a new creation, a new exodus, a new wilderness pilgrimage, a new David, and a new temple. These connections are embedded in the structure of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, signaled by explicit quotations or unmistakable intertextual echoes. Recognizing such road signs is crucial to our learning to read Scripture as the apostles did.

But what about those texts where the road signs are hard to see, apparently hidden by underbrush? For such passages we look to *landmarks* that dominate the horizon of the biblical narrative.

2. **Landmarks**: Biblical elements and motifs that are built into the offices of covenantal mediation that God gave Israel, offices that now converge in Christ, who is, in the end, “only mediator between God and man” (1 Tim. 2:5).

Landmarks are not as specific as street signs. But looming landmarks can help us “get our bearings” in unfamiliar territory. We have a daughter, son-in-law, and three fantastic grandchildren who live in Colorado Springs. When we visit them in “the Springs,” on any clear day we know what direction we are driving: the Rockies rise to the west, the plains stretch out to the east, and a glimpse of Pike’s Peak above the western foothills shows us whether we are north or south of the center of the city. Now, Pike’s Peak is a large landmark, and seeing it in the distance is not much help if you are looking for a specific house on a specific street. But the plains, the mountains, and the Peak help us out-of-town visitors get our bearings as we move around the city. I would suggest that Scripture offers similar landmarks to help us get our bearings as we try to find the highways that lead from various OT and NT passages toward Jesus, at Scripture’s center. To use a different metaphor, from architecture, we could think of the clearly labeled types as the visible structure of a skyscraper that rises from the earth. We know that it rests on an unseen, subterranean foundation—a substructure. The shape of the building we see gives us hints of the contours of the substructure that we do not see. This imagery was implied in the subtitle of C. H. Dodd’s important but rare little book, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology*, which (as far as I can tell) seems to have had only a single printing in 1952. Dodd’s point was that the foundation that unifies the New Testament kerygma is the conviction that Jesus’ saving mission was the focal point of God’s plan for history, and therefore that it had been foretold and foreshadowed in the Scriptures given to Israel. The Old Testament sub-structure could be inferred not only in the OT wording actually cited by NT authors but also in the wider OT contexts from which citations and allusions had been drawn. The shape of the edifice that we can see “above ground,” as it were, shows us the contours of the foundation, that lies outside our view, deep in bedrock.

In other words, the typological connections that the NT explicitly identifies between OT events, institutions, offices, and persons and Jesus are not exceptions to some general hermeneutical rule that forbids us to read Israel’s history as anticipating what God would do in Christ. Rather, the street signs—obvious instances of “correspondence and heightening”—make visible patterns of
interconnection that are really there in the history of God’s people, though the deeper patterns may be harder to see.

Among the substructure “pylons” (to use Dodd’s image) or “landmarks” (to return to Pike’s Peak) that I find most helpful are the three categories of leaders by whom God mediated his Word, his rule, and his presence to ancient Israel: prophets, kings, and priests.

These “theocratic officers” or covenant mediators—prophets, priests, kings—were buffers, insulating God’s defiled people from his consuming holiness. But Israel’s prophets, priests, and kings were also bridges: because God is gracious, he still insists on living with his guilty people—to speak to them, to make peace between himself and us rebels, to direct us in safe paths and to protect us from those who want to destroy us.

I am suggesting that we should view the prophetic, priestly, and kingly figures of ancient Israel in relation to the convergence and climax of those functions in Christ. As the handout shows, I did not come up with this idea on my own. That should reassure you! The confessional documents that we have inherited from the Reformers have reminded us that each office and officer in a distinctive way illumines the complex and comprehensive sufficiency of Christ as the “one mediator between God and man” (1 Tim. 2:5). The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647), for example, teaches:

A.23 Christ, as our redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation.

Similarly, almost a century earlier (1563) the Heidelberg Catechism had answered the question (31), “Why is [Jesus] called the Christ, meaning ‘anointed’?” in this way:

Because he has been ordained by God the Father and has been anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief prophet and teacher who perfectly reveals to us the secret counsel and will of God for our deliverance; our only high priest who has set us free by the one sacrifice of his body, and who continually pleads our cause with the Father; and our eternal king who governs us by his Word and Spirit, and who guards us and keeps up in the freedom he has won for us.

This threefold analysis of mediatorial functions in the Old Testament and of Christ’s fulfillment of all three functions is picking up cues embedded in the Scriptures themselves. Although it appears that the patriarchs and Moses fulfilled prophetic, royal, and priestly roles, in the later history of Israel, the distinctive responsibilities of hearing and speaking God’s true word, executing God’s righteous rule, and serving in God’s holy presence with holiness were distributed to different men: prophets, kings, and priests.

So, for example, in Deuteronomy 17-18 we find specific instructions pertaining to Kings (17:14-20), Priests (18:1-8), and Prophet(s) (18:9-22). Kings must not accumulate excessive wealth or foreign wives; rather they must and keep and study a copy of the Law, to keep their hearts humble, just, and wise. Priests have no inheritance in land, so they must be provided for from the other tribes’ tithes as they stand in the sanctuary on behalf of their brothers. Israel must not try to probe cosmic secrets through pagan divination, but must listen to the “prophet like Moses” whom the Lord will raise up.
Another threefold breakdown of Israel's theocratic mediators is implied in Jeremiah 2:8, where God expresses his God's displeasure with unfaithful priests, unfaithful shepherds, and unfaithful prophets. In Jeremiah 18:18 the trio is modified slightly from "priests, shepherds, and prophets" to "priests, sages, and prophets."

In the New Testament we hear Jesus identified as the promised prophet like Moses (Acts 3), as the anointed King (Acts 2; Rev. 19), and as our great high priest (Hebrews 10). In fact, the prologue to the epistle/sermon to the Hebrews (1:1-4) introduces Christ with reference to all three of Israel's theocratic offices. He is the spokesman from God who stands in continuity with the ancient prophets but transcends them: "Long ago...God spoke...by the prophets... in these last days he has spoken by his Son...." (2:1-2). He is the high priest who has "made purification for sins" (2:17-18). His royal authority as king is signaled by the titles that distinguish him as God's supreme heir, God's wisdom, and the enthroned ruler who fulfills Psalm 110: "a Son, ... the heir of all things...radiance of the glory (wisdom)...sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...." (2:5-9).

As we read the Old Testament and observe prophetic, royal, and priestly figures functioning as intermediaries of the Lord's truth, authority, and holiness to the people of God, the themes associated with each of these offices, and accounts of those who filled them in ancient Israel (sometimes well, sometimes poorly), are helpful landmarks to direct us to the fully-sufficient Revealer, Reconciler, and Ruler, Jesus the Anointed. So I'm suggesting that it is fruitful to keep the typological "correspondence and heightening" paradigm in mind wherever we encounter these individuals and themes. We should expect that prophets who spoke God's truth, priests who entered God's holy presence to offer prayer and sacrifice, and kings who ruled in God's wisdom and justice and fought in God's strength were, to one degree or another, previews of the final Prophet, Priest, and King for whom our hearts long.

**Christ, the Final Prophet**

The focus of the prophet's mission was revelation, delivering the Word of God. As the Shorter Catechism says, "Christ executeth the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by his word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation" (Westminster Shorter Catechism 24). Israel's prophets were called first to see God's glory and to hear God's speech. They were summoned up to God's mountain, or (in vision) into God's celestial throne room, to receive their message from the divine King (Isa. 6; Ezek. 1). Before God's messengers speak, they must listen. Ezekiel ate God's words—sweet to the taste, bitter in the stomach—to take in the message before he could give it out.

Moses stood out among the OT prophets as the one who beheld God's glory on Sinai (Exod. 33-34) and with whom God spoke “mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles” (Numbers 12:6-8). Jesus is the prophet like Moses, yet greater than Moses, as the Son exceeds the servant and the creator overshadows the house he has built (Heb. 3:1-6).

Prophets not only see and hear. They also speak and show. Miraculous signs confirm the prophetic authority of Moses, Elijah and Elisha, and others. So also Jesus' authority as spokesman sent by the Father is confirmed because he is, like Moses, “a prophet, powerful in word and deed” (Luke 24:19). Luke especially highlights the parallels between Jesus' mighty signs and those performed through Elijah and Elisha (Lk. 4-9).

Prophets bring God's message of judgment and salvation, fulfilling the roles of Prosecutor and Promiser. 2 Chronicles 36:15-16 summed up the reason for Judah's exile:
"The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, until there was no remedy."

In Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenant farmers, he retells the sordid history of the mistreatment of the prophets, using the vineyard imagery of Isaiah 5 (Mark 12:1-12). As the beloved Son, he himself is the final emissary in a long line of mistreated messengers sent to demand God’s due from his people—bringing the succession of prophets to its climax.

As we read the former prophets (historical books) and the latter prophets, with their words of warning and indictment and comfort and hope, we need to do so in the awareness that wherever and however, and through whomever, the Word of God comes to us, it comes as Jesus exercises his office of prophet, “revealing to us, by his Word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.”

We want to ask, “What is the path from this prophet—whether faithful or flawed, courageous or confused—to Jesus the Word made flesh, the Father’s final and best Word?”

**Christ, our Great High Priest**

The focus of the priest’s calling was reconciliation and the resultant intimate access to the presence of God, whose holiness is like a consuming, purifying fire.

The Shorter Catechism focuses on what is distinctive in the priest’s role when it speaks of how the Lord Jesus has fulfilled and continues to fulfill the priestly office:

A 25. Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God; and in making continual intercession for us.

But the calling of Israel’s priests was complex, and they were associated with a variety of institutions and regulations—obviously the tabernacle and the temple, along with the sacrifices that were offered in these sanctuaries. Prayer was also a distinctively priestly task, since only the priests had access to the holy chamber in which incense, symbolizing Israel’s prayers, was offered.

The sanctuary was also the holy territory in which the Lord dwelt with his people and the priests were charged to protect the purity of this sacred space from any and all defilement. Tied to holy space was holy time: weekly Sabbaths, yearly feasts of unleavened bread, firstfruits, and tabernacles, periodic sabbatical years to give rest to the soil itself, and the Jubilee year of liberation. As the guardians of God’s holy presence they were associated with holy food, farms, clothes, bodies, buildings: the kosher dietary laws, laws of separation, rituals of ceremonial cleansing, and more. Through this host of regulations the Lord embedded in the visible, touchable, everyday experience of Israel the recurring message that they were a people set apart from the other peoples as his special possession, privileged to approach him in holy worship.

The priests had no allotment of farmland and were therefore dependent on the tithes of crops brought to the temple by the other Israelite tribes. Therefore the priesthood also became the focus of Israel’s expression of compassion for the widow, the orphan, and the alien, as well as for their priestly intercessors.
As we survey the tasks, privileges, and performance of Israel's priests in the holy presence of God, we will want to see how the priests' ministries of purification and reconciliation served as a landmark to point God's people forward to Christ. Again and again we notice the twin trends of correspondence and heightening. To atone for sins, blood must be shed; but animals' blood cannot cleanse the conscience. Only the blood of the great high priest can do that—and he has done so. His death is the complete and once-for-all atoning sacrifice, never needing to be repeated. Yet those reconciled by that comprehensive atonement continue to offer sacrifices: not slain animals or incinerated grain offerings, but a "sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (Heb. 13:15), and the "sweet savor offerings" of donations to other believers (Phil 4:18) and other expressions of compassion that meet others' needs as "sacrifices pleasing to God" (Heb. 13:16). Christians are constituted a "kingdom of priests," the fulfillment of ancient Israel's special privilege, through Jesus the great high priest. Thus we are called to respond as priests to the mercies of God—in every aspect of our lives, everywhere and every moment of every day: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1).

About every priest we want to ask, “What is the path from this priest—whether faithful or flawed, pure or polluted—to Jesus the great high priest, who offered the final sacrifice and rose again, to intercede for us in heaven itself?”

The Anointed King of Kings

The focus of the King's calling is wise and righteous rule and strong defense of God's people against all assaults of enemies. The Shorter Catechism summarizes the Bible's teaching on the kingly work of Christ in this way:

A. 26. Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.

Here we notice the presence of military themes: conquest (subduing), defending, restraining and conquering enemies. And, not surprisingly, we hear the governmental motif of ruling.

Kings are defenders and judges. The warrior theme is intrinsic to the king's role. Jesus is the royal champion who defends his people and disarms their enemies—paradoxically, through the apparent weakness of his cross (Col. 2:14-15; Heb. 2:14-16). But also related to the king's role is the theme of wisdom (Solomon) that qualifies the king to render just verdicts. Jesus' teaching in parables (Hebrew: meshalim) is thus a royal activity, corresponding to Solomon's proverbs (meshalim, 1 Kings 4:32; Prov. 1:1, 6; see Ps. 78:2, cited in Matt. 13:35). Jesus is the incarnate wisdom of God, which—paradoxically—is most vividly exhibited in the apparently foolishness of his cross (1 Cor. 1:18, 12-25).

Psalm 2, often applied to Jesus in the NT, identifies the Anointed One—the king—as the Son of God. Psalm 89, probably alluded to in Paul's song of Christ in Colossians 1, speaks of David and his dynasty as "the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth"—the Lord's preeminent heir, reigning supreme under the blessing of his Father (89:27).

The kings of Israel and Judah—even David, the best of them—fell short of the standard for a true king (2 Sam. 23:2-7; see v. 39 and 2 Sam. 24—David's sins). But Jesus, the son of David, was anointed to bring the rescue that all previous kings failed to achieve. In Acts 10:36-39 Peter
announced that Jesus had been “anointed” with God’s Spirit as he received baptism from John and went forth in that power to “heal those oppressed by the devil.” This is the Enemy that Jesus came to confront and conquer! With authority he commanded unclean spirits to release their captives, and the demons were compelled to obey. By his death Jesus destroyed the devil who had the power to inflict death (Hebrews 2:14-16). Through the weakness of his cross, our King disarmed rulers and authorities, having triumphed over them (Colossians 2:14-15). The Lion of Judah who has conquered appears as the Lamb standing, though having been slain (Revelation 5; 19:11-21).

About every king or judge we want to ask, “What is the path from this warrior/ruler/judge—whether faithful or flawed, just or corrupt, bold or fearful, wise or foolish—to Jesus the king of kings, who defeated our great Enemy and directs us in his wisdom?”

“Landmarks” Conclusion

As we read our Bible and see prophets, priests, and kings in the historical narrative, we recall that, by virtue of his office, every prophet, priest, and king in Israel’s history (and every judge and every father) was in some way a landmark directing Israel’s hopes ahead to the final and preeminent Prophet, Priest and King, Jesus the Anointed.

Some servants of God were faithful, though finite and flawed, previews of the perfect Prophet/Priest/King to come. Others were “negative images,” the antithesis of the virtues demanded in one who would stand between the Lord and his people. But those failures also showed, in their own way, how great the need was for the One who was to come.

When we these mediatorial officers and the motifs related to their roles, we need to ask, “What aspect of Christ’s work as mediator comes under the spotlight in this passage?”

- His revealing role as prophet, speaking to us from the Father and enabling us to hear his Word?
- His ruling role as king, acting with wisdom, courage, and justice to assert God’s reign in the world?
- His reconciling, relationship-restoring role as priest, who gave himself for us and ever lives to intercede for us before the Father...and to bring us into that Holy Place?

3. Getting the Lay of the Land: The “Covenant Terrain” of the Scriptures

Picture yourself lost in a forest on a cloudy night—no road signs or trail markers, no landmarks to be seen. What seemed, when you set out on it, to be a well-worn path disappeared into a thicket, or perhaps forked in two different directions. But you are an experienced hiker, and you have come upon a gently flowing creek. Knowing that every stream in those rolling hills eventually wends its way down to the river, and beside that river is a town that offers shelter from a coming storm, which direction will you head? Upstream, against the current of the creek? Of course not. Across the creek at a 90-degree angle from its flow? No. You will head downstream, following the flow the water. Although you cannot foresee the creek’s every twist and turn, you know that gravity is pulling its waters down to the river, and thus to the town. It shows the lay of the land.

This scenario illustrates the importance of paying attention to how a specific passage fits into the big, overarching theme of the Bible. In all the Bible’s diversity and details, at its heart Holy Scripture is about the relationship of God the Creator to his human creatures. It traces the unfolding history of that relationship from (1) its pristine joy at creation, through (2) its disruption by our fall into
sin, to (3) its restoration through God’s merciful rescue, first (a) anticipated in the promises and previews in the Old Testament and then (b) accomplished by Jesus (in his obedient life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection), now (c) applied to our lives by the Holy Spirit, and finally (d) to be consummated, when he returns, in the new heavens and earth. The biblical way to say “the relationship of God and humankind” is “covenant.” To “get the lay of the land” that shows how all roads (even faint footpaths) lead to Scripture’s “metropolis,”—to “follow the current” of each biblical stream—we need to see the Bible as the book of the covenant, the book of the bond between our Creator-Lord and us, his creature-servants.

When I teach this point in churches that may not be as attuned to “covenant” as, I expect, we are here, I asked folks to open their Bibles to the page just before Genesis 1, and then to the page just before Matthew 1. On those two pages I expect they will find the words “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” Those terms are so familiar that we may ignore their significance, filtering them out like “white noise.” But we should notice what the terms “Old” and “New Testament” signal about the structure and content of the Scripture.

“Old” and “New” draw a distinction in time, between what came earlier and what has come later. They signal that the Bible’s “lay of the land” is historical. The Bible is the self-disclosure of the God who does things in history, who does not “keep his place” as an aloof, safe, super-spiritual abstraction that we can admire or discuss from afar (as the Deists of the 18th century thought he should). This is a God who “meddles” in the affairs of individuals and nations, who creates and calls and judges and rescues. The God who speaks in the Bible has an agenda, and he is on the move to direct history toward his good goal for his creation.

Secondly, consider the word “Testament.” In our day “testament” appears in the term “last will and testament,” the document by which an individual directs how his or her property is to be distributed when he or she has died. As a term designating the two subdivisions of the Bible, testament does designate a legal document, in which one individual unilaterally issues directives that affect others. It comes into our English versions “testament” from the Latin word testamentum, which in turn represented the New Testament’s Greek word diathēkē. The New Testament authors used diathēkē in passages that referred to the promise of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31—Jesus’ words instituting the Lord’s Supper, Paul’s discussion of old and new covenant ministry in 2 Corinthians 3, and Hebrews 7-10—because Jewish scholars of the Dispersion who translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (Septuagint) had used diathēkē in place of the Hebrew word berith—which we now see rendered “covenant” in our English versions. The secular sense of the Greek diathēkē (and Latin testamentum) as “last will and testament” lacked one crucial component of the Hebrew berith: a covenant is a solemn, legal commitment between living persons—husband and wife, a dominant king and a weaker king, and of course the Lord and Israel. The berith, covenant, obligated both parties to keep their respective “ends of the bargain.” But the Lord set the terms through his promises and commands, and he announced the consequences for “breach of contract.” His servants’ role was simply to say, “Amen!” to God’s promises, and “Yes, Sir!” to God’s demands…and, from that point on, to trust and obey.

So we should understand “Old Testament/New Testament” as “Old Covenant/New Covenant,” and see these terms as reflecting God’s promise in Jeremiah 31 to establish a new, unbreakable covenant, not like the covenant of Sinai that Israel had violated (Jer. 31:31-34; see Heb. 8:6-10). That covenant promise encapsulated the historical structure of the Bible: God’s promise and its fulfillment in Jesus distinguished the two major epochs of God’s speaking to humanity: (a) the Old Covenant, beginning with the books of Moses, read in synagogues each Sabbath (2 Cor. 3:14-15; see
Acts 15:21); and (b) the New Covenant, established by the sacrificial blood of Christ and announced in the apostolic gospel (Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:21; 2 Cor. 3:6).

The Components of Biblical Covenants

"Covenant" is the biblical way to say "relationship." But "covenant" refers to a particular kind of interpersonal relationship. There are all sorts of interpersonal relationships in society: superficial acquaintance, business contracts, employment agreements, international treaties, friendship, casual dating, marriage, and more. Biblical covenants between the Lord and human beings are like some of these in some respects, and radically different from others. To pick up the clues to "the lay of the land" that the covenant-focus of the Bible provides, we need to identify the components that come together in biblical covenants. Although the covenants in the Bible differ in some details, I believe that this simplified description captures what they have in common:

A biblical covenant is a bond of interpersonal commitment and exclusive loyalty between the Lord and his servants, sovereignly instituted and structured by the Lord, expressed through mutual obligations, and enforced through life-or-death consequences (adapted from Robertson, Christ of the Covenants).

A covenant is, first, a committed relationship, a relationship of exclusive loyalty. The bond between the Lord and his people is intimate and affectionate, so it is compared to marriage. And like a good marriage, the covenant partners are committed to be faithful to each other exclusively. The Lord is jealous for his people, wanting them to love and trust him alone, not wandering after any other master and protector. In the first of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:3), the Lord insists: "No other gods in my presence! No rivals for your affections!"

This bond is also legal and structured, so often biblical covenants have formal features that make them resemble international treaties among Ancient Near Eastern. Words—written words—are crucial to God’s covenants, for through his words God binds himself in promise to his people and binds his people to himself through command.

Biblical covenants are bonds that are sovereignly instituted and structured by the Lord. They are not negotiated contracts between equals, but commitments imposed by the Lord whose powerful prior actions make the covenant possible in the first place. Covenants begin with what God has done (creation, exodus, cross), and from God's actions flow the motive, rationale, and form for our response as his servants (Exod. 20:1-2).

Finally, the responses of the parties to the obligations of the covenant have consequences. Shed blood in covenant ratification ceremonies graphically represents the life-or-death consequences of covenant loyalty or treachery (Exod. 24:3-8; Jer. 34:17-20). Not surprisingly, we see the consequences most graphically from the servant’s side of the relationship. Because the Lord is faithful and true clear through, he always keeps his commitments. Therefore he always deserves his servant’s complete trust and allegiance. Yet, in Genesis 15 the Lord secures his promise by putting his own life on the line, invoking judgment on himself in the (impossible) event that he should fail to keep his word. As for the human servants bound in covenant to their divine King, alternative consequences are real possibilities and they are severe: loyal obedience will lead to unimaginable blessing and life, but rebellion will lead to unbearable cursing and death (Exod. 20:5, 7, 12; see Deut. 27-28).
The Bible’s "lay of the land"—the slope that directs the flow of Scripture’s every stream (every event and individual, every book and theme)—is the story of God’s covenant with humanity (its initiation at creation, disruption by sin, restoration through grace, and future consummation in glory). So how does this help us find our bearings as we try to read and preach Christ from all the Scriptures in a way that handles every text with integrity and fidelity?

In every text, look for the roles, responsibilities, and actions of the two parties to the covenant, the covenant Lord and the covenant Servant.

Among the most prominent themes associated with Yahweh’s role as covenant Lord are: Creator (Gen. 1:1), Provider (Isaiah 25:6-9), Rescuer and Protector (Exodus 3:1-6, 13-15), Commander (Deuteronomy 6:4-6), and Judge (Daniel 7:9-14). Among the prominent themes associated with the role of God’s human covenant servants are:

a. Primacy and privilege (Adam among the animals, Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15, 19-20; Israel among the nations, Exodus 19:5-6; the Son above all creation, Col. 1:15-22)


d. Product of probation:

   1. For Adam and his descendants, and for Israel: disobedience leading to banishment and death
      - Adam, Genesis 3:8-19; Romans 5:12-14;
      - Israel [exile], Deut. 11:26-29; ch. 27-28
   2. For Jesus and all who are in Christ: obedience leading to resurrection life! (Acts 2:24-28; 1 Cor. 15:20-26; Rom. 8:8-11, 22-24)

Dr. Mark Futato, formerly my colleague at WSC and now professor of OT and dean of RTS Orlando, suggested a threefold way of viewing Jesus’ role as the ultimate Servant of the covenant, and our union with him in his covenant-service:

1. In our place Christ fulfilled the kept the conditions of the covenant: devoted loyalty, dependent trust, eager obedience. He obeyed all God’s commands on our behalf (his “active obedience,” ground of our justification as the declaration of righteousness). Therefore he can claim by right all the blessings promised by God to the faithful covenant-keeping servant...and he shares these blessings with us!

2. In our place Christ endured the consequence of our violation of the covenant: God’s righteous wrath inflicted on Jesus the condemnation, forsakenness, and death that he (Jesus) did not deserve—but we did. He endured the curses of the covenant on our behalf (his “passive obedience,” ground of our justification as the forgiveness of sins and the reconciliation of our relation to God—from hostility to peace). God the righteous judge has
pronounced our debt to his justice “paid in full”—no charge or crime remains on our record—and welcomes us as beloved children (our adoption).

These are the two dimensions of the forensic, legal, objective, extrinsic aspect of our salvation—the dual ground of our justification: Christ’s flawless keeping of God’s Law and Christ’s endurance of the Law’s curse against its violators. They are grounded in our representative union with Christ Jesus.

But there is more. Christ’s saving work conveys a dual benefit, not only addressing our objective guilt before God’s righteous tribunal (in the act of justification) but also addressing our subjective defilement (in the ongoing work of sanctification) (Clark, Duplex Beneficium). As Augustus Toplady prayed in “Rock of Ages,” “Be of sin the double cure: cleanse me from its guilt and power.” The Spirit of God unites us to Christ vitally, applying his resurrection life to begin and maintain, as Paul wrote in Phil. 1:6 “a good work in you”: the subjective, internal transformation of our allegiance, values, affections, and ultimately actions, to conform us to the image of Christ:

3. In our hearts Christ enlivens, renews, and transforms us through his Spirit so that we begin to live for God’s glory by obeying the Lord’s commands, out of gratitude for grace and love for the Lord who first loved us (our regeneration and sanctification).

Only Jesus can free us from curse and give us title to blessing! Still, salvation is more than justification; and it is more than justification and adoption. It also includes sanctification (freeing us from the tyranny of sin) and ultimately glorification (freeing us from the very presence of sin, and its result in death).

This perspective helps us see the deep substructure that unites the apostles’ proclamation of Christ’s redemptive achievement from the Old Testament and their appeal to those same Scriptures as moral warning and example to the new covenant people of God—the aspect of apostolic hermeneutics and homiletics to which Jason Hood called attention in his recent essay.

Questions to ask in order to “get the lay of the land” and so proclaim Christ from all the Scriptures:

1. Does this passage show me the Lord (as creator, provider, protector, commander judge)? How does Jesus fulfill those roles?
2. Does this passage show me the Servant (preeminence, provision, probation, product of probation)? How did Jesus fulfill the Servant’s role for me? How does his Spirit remake me to be a faithful servant in Christ?

Remembering that the Bible, as a covenant document, is always two-sided—addressing the relationship between the divine Lord and his human servants—will help us keep our balance as we preach the diverse texts in the Bible:

1. The Lord of the covenant reveals his majesty, power, purity, mercy—revealed through his initiatives in creation and redemption—as grounds for the response he expects from his servants.
2. The commanded response of the covenant servants is never presented as a mere “categorical imperative,” a bare duty. Our obligation to obey is always a genuine and fitting response to the self-disclosure and the prior action of the Lord of the covenant. So then,
For texts that stress the servant’s responsibility, we will want to scan the contexts to discover the Lord’s initiative and activity, the basis of our obligation and fountain of our motivation. For texts that stress the Lord’s activity, we will scan the contexts to discover the response expected from the servant.

Apostolic Christocentric preaching is big enough to encompass not only redemption accomplished but also redemption applied. Christ-centered preaching announces redemption accomplished: what Jesus did for us once-for-all in history, fulfilling all the Father’s promises as covenant Lord, and all our obligations as covenant servant—and, more than that, enduring the covenant curse that our treason so richly deserve! But it also announces the benefits of redemption applied, the death-to-life difference that Christ’s once-for-all accomplishment effects in those who are united to this new covenant mediator by faith, And those redemptive benefits applied to us by the Spirit of Christ are wide enough to embrace both his rectifying of our sordid record and the renovation of our corrupted hearts: regeneration, forgiveness, vindication, reconciliation, adoption, sanctification, and glorification.

Appendix: The Broader Covenant Structure of the History of Redemption

In Jeremiah 31, when God promised to bring a “new covenant” that will be better than the “old covenant,” that old covenant was God’s compact with Israel forged at Mount Sinai, delivered through Moses. Sinai is not the first time that “covenant” appears in the Bible. In Genesis 12 God made a covenant with Abraham, to bless him with children, give his descendants a homeland, and make him a blessing to all nations. Even earlier, in Genesis 9 God made a covenant with Noah, his family, and all living things, promising never again to wash the world clean of human filth by water (Gen. 6:18; 9:9-17). So the theme of covenant shows us “the lay of the land” in the Bible not only en route from Sinai to Calvary, but even further back in history. How far back?

Though the word “covenant” does not appear in the Bible before Noah, the reality of a covenant bond uniting God the Creator and his human creatures existed. We have reason to believe that God created Adam and Eve into a covenant bond with himself from the start. There were the parties: the Creator and the creatures whom he specially fashioned in his own image. As they stood before him in Eden, innocent and unfallen, he had created an ideal environment for them to express their exclusive trust in and loyalty toward him. His blessing and commission to multiply and to rule entailed both commands to obey and the promise of success as they did. His prohibition of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and his warning that death would ensue if his edict were defied showed the consequences that would follow, if his servant failed to fulfill the obligations. Moreover, their disobedience deprived them of access to the tree of life—a hint of the positive consequence that would have resulted had they stayed loyal. So the key components of a covenant were present.

Later Scriptures confirm this conclusion. In Hosea 6:7 God compares Israel’s violation of the covenant at Sinai with Adam’s first sin: “But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.” In the New Testament, the comparisons and contrasts between Adam and Christ that we saw in Romans 5 presuppose that God’s original relationship with Adam was covenantal in character. Paul mentions the components of the covenant: parties (Adam and Christ as the human servants), commitment, obligations, and consequences (condemnation or justification, death or life).

There is a biblical basis, then, for the way in which the Westminster Confession described God’s original arrangement with unfallen Adam as a covenant: “The first covenant made with man was a
covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience” (7.2). It was a “covenant of works,” because Adam’s avoiding the curse of death and receiving the blessing of life was directly dependent on Adam’s own complete and unswerving obedience as covenant servant—exclusive commitment to the Lord, expressed in continuous and comprehensive fulfillment of the Lord’s commands.

As Genesis, Hosea, Paul, and the whole history of the human race reveal, Adam broke that original covenant at creation. The consequence of covenant curse—alienation, decay, death—began to eat like slow cancer into Adam’s and Eve’s relationships with each other and with God, into the rest of the created world, and into their own bodies.

Yet God was not finished with his covenant servants. Immediately after the fall into sin God gives our guilty human family a ray of hope in his word of curse on Satan the tempter who spoke through the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). The first hint of post-fall covenant, brief as it is, brings into view the participation of both parties to the covenant, Lord and servant, to undo the damage done through Adam’s failure. The restoration of mankind to God’s favor, the reestablishment of covenant communion, will be God’s work—and man’s. We see God’s initiative: “I will put enmity between the serpent and the woman.” But we also see a crucial role for the woman’s seed, the faithful covenant servant, who through his own suffering, his “bruised heel,” will crush the evil one’s power, bruising the enemy’s head.