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## *Do You Preach Christ?*



*Mark Lauterbach*

*Let the motto upon your whole ministry be, "Christ is all."  
—Cotton Mather*

*L*et me begin with a story. A few months ago, a young man came up before his presbytery for an ordination examination. He was grilled theologically. He proved his training credentials. Finally, he preached his ordination sermon. It was a very fine sermon on marriage. It was practical and helpful to the listeners. After delivery, he was dismissed while the presbytery evaluated his preaching.

There was some deliberation. There was no question of his ability to teach and preach. All noted, however, it was lacking something. After some reflection, they summarized their concern: *That sermon gave no indication that Jesus Christ had come, lived a sinless life, suffered and borne sin and death into the grave, and rose again in triumph.*

The young man preached with an open Bible. He explained the meaning of the passage. He gave wise application. Nevertheless, it was not a sermon that showed any influence of the work of Christ. Therefore, the presbytery did not believe it was a Christian sermon. In other words, a Muslim or a Mormon could have said the same thing.

This is telling. How many sermons have you heard or

preached that could have been given by a member of the Latter-Day Saints? How many times have you heard the Old Testament taught in a way that a rabbi would affirm? Is such preaching and teaching biblical? I do not think so. Here is my thesis:

All faithful New Testament ministry (public and private, preaching and prayer) must carry the fragrance of the Redeemer. The message of the gospel is our one message for unbelievers and believers.

Or quoting Charles Bridges in *The Christian Ministry*:

All the principles and duties of the Gospel bear a relation more or less direct to Him . . . Only let us be careful, that his name throws life and glory upon all our Ministrations, and that every sermon tends to draw sinners to him, and to establish Christians in their consistent profession.<sup>1</sup>

Before we develop this further, let me note a significant assumption made by Bridges—that all ministry is to follow the pattern of apostolic ministry. How the apostles worked is how we are to work. Their *modus operandi* is to be ours. If they traced everything back to Christ, then we must as well.

Each of the following passages illustrates the point I am making.

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27).

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 1:1-4).

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving (Colossians 2:6-7).

And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Peter 1:17-19).

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits (James 1:9-11).

We could go on. I think it is safe to say that the person and work of Jesus is the center of the Bible, the key to interpreting the Bible, the basis of all Christian practice and ethics. He saturates and controls the perspective of every book of the New Testament, including James! The apostles proclaimed the person and work of Christ to the lost, and they unfolded the significance of Christ to the saved. Christian growth is rooted in the same Christ by which we are justified. Our perspective on this present world is conditioned by the judgment of this evil world and the dawn of the kingdom of Christ. The New Testament sees marriage and family, work and money, time and vocation, citizenship and church membership under the achievement of Christ.

How naturally do the Apostles introduce their Master in the midst of discussions apparently the most irrelevant. . . . The resolution, therefore, to know nothing—to preach nothing—and to glory in nothing else, marks a mind equally enlarged in its compass and scriptural in its apprehensions.<sup>2</sup>

But is that the way we preach? It was not so for me. Let me tell you how I reached this conclusion.

God spoke to me. He did not do so directly. An elderly man was the garment of his word to me. This gentle saint, now with Jesus, snagged me in the hall as I left my office. He was in quite a fury as he admonished me, "You do not preach Christ." I was stunned and dismissive. My heart revolted, resisted, and wondered. I reflected on who delivered it. A senile man? Not at all. John was a godly man, experienced in church life and witness. His wife was a PK (pastor's kid), her father a man of unusual godliness.

I stood back and considered. At first, I wanted to dismiss the criticism. I looked at what I was preaching. I was in the middle of Romans! Here I was being told I did not preach Christ. How can that be?

My respect for him made me pay heed. He spoke to me; he did not gossip. That, in itself, deserves the Medal of Honor. He began to explain. We debated. I passed on my favorite writers—Edwards, Hodge, Warfield. "Too philosophical," I was told. "Wonderful truths about God, but an Old Testament saint could have said that." I kept at it and began to get some understanding.

I found this nagging my subconscious—it percolated on the back burner of my mind for more than a decade. I continued to preach Scripture. His objection persisted. How can I *not* preach Christ and preach the Bible? I grabbed and read anything that would help me along the way. I listened to all kinds of preaching. I read new books in this light. I listened to my people, who said that my preaching often left them burdened, with nowhere to turn. Maybe I was not preaching as the Apostles did? Their hearers seemed full of joy and hope.

God sent another messenger. A friend, fresh from a Ph.D. in New Testament, summarized the message of the New Testament for me: *Jesus Christ*. That is it. "Christians are to work out the significance of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Everything is different because of Jesus," he said. "They preached the gospel to the lost and to the saved." That seemed like an awfully simple conclusion to four years at a British

University! I continued my journey, modifying my preaching as I went. Now I had two friends to help me on the way.

It sounded so one-dimensional. How can you preach the gospel every week and not get bored? How is this feeding the saints? What about doctrines—the character of God, the inspiration of Scripture, the church, eschatology? What about commands and holiness?

I preached Ephesians and 1 Timothy. I noticed that the letters of the Apostles keep going back to the message of Jesus—telling it again to the saints. I picked up Galatians for the second time. This time I was overcome by the argument of Paul. He is violent in his rhetoric. The issue: the Galatians were moving on from the "gospel." They were believers. They were not teaching a new gospel to the lost. They were teaching a new gospel to the saved. He was calling them back to Christ—the meaning of his coming, his achievement. The whole of the Christian life is to be lived in the glory of Jesus.

Now I began consciously to change my preaching. I preached Galatians, Matthew, James, the doctrine of the church, prayer, the book of Revelation. But I preached them differently. I drew everything to Christ. I turned people repeatedly to his finished work.

There was response. A few got angry. A few resisted. They wanted "deep truths." A few awakened. They testified to a complete change of perspective. Their worldview changed.

A few soul-mates came along—others in ministry who had this passion. Most notably, the brothers at Sovereign Grace Ministries.<sup>3</sup> They love the centrality of the cross—they preach it, sing it, exult in it, and proclaim it. A friend gave me some tapes by Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. As I listened, my heart leaped for joy. Tim traces everything back to Jesus—gender issues, marriage problems, co-dependency, right and left wing politics—everything! This is what I was looking for.<sup>4</sup>

I have come to the very uncomfortable conviction that there are no other legitimate patterns of ministry. This is *not* "one approach among many." This is not a model for ministry among multiple offerings. And I have measured my own

years of ministry in this light. This has brought me to moments of sadness at how many years I whipped my people with the law in the name of Christ. I have become more sensitized. I now hear preaching that stuns me for its absence of anything of Christ. I have left worship with a dry soul because we have sung songs where Christ is anonymous.

So that is the journey. Now for the principles. I will encourage you to read the letters of the New Testament and highlight every mention of Christ and every hint of a "end of this age, beginning of the new" motive. You will find that even James, the epistle in which Luther could not find Jesus, is set against the new age backdrop!

#### WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Let's start by what we mean by the "gospel." Is this the Four Spiritual Laws? The Romans Road? Yes, and no. My earliest "gospel" was a "me and my salvation" gospel—separated from the church, separated from the drama. "God loves you, you have sinned, Jesus died for your sin—you must trust in him. This is the good news—you may receive Christ and have your sins forgiven."

That is the gospel, but it is only *part* of the gospel. The gospel is Jesus: that he is the Lord of heaven, that he became truly human, very man of very man, that the world he entered was ruled by legal rights by the Dark Lord and sin and death, that only the sacrifice of a sinless man, infinite in value, could break the moral right of the devil to rule. He came, bound the strong man, turned back his insidious rule at every point—disease, demonization, destructive forces—plundered his house, took this entire corrupted world and bore it to the cross. The old is done away. The prince of this world is judged. The world as we know it is in its last hour. We could do nothing to better ourselves or save ourselves. Jesus does for us what we could not do for ourselves—he is righteous, he pays the ransom to set us free, he breaks the power of the Dark Lord over us.

In the resurrection, the new day has begun. The kingdom of our Lord has started. All who trust in him are heirs of that

kingdom's future glory and will triumph over all. The kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. Everything is different now. The world is passing away. We are in the last chapter of history. The darkness is passing; the dawn is brightening.

This is the gospel, the grand story of the re-establishment of the kingdom of God. The gospel is not about *me*—it is about the judgment of the present age and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth in which God will dwell with his new people, redeemed from every tribe and nation.

Some will note that I said nothing about the dark backdrop of sin. That is partially true. The mission and work of Christ depicts humanity in the most desperate of conditions. I believe the message is amazing news for the damned, not nice news for the struggling. But I have also discovered that advocates of total depravity sometimes preach *bad* news. We focus so much on our vileness. The tone of the New Testament is triumph and joy.

This gospel is offensive. It proclaims that the end of wealth, success, career, politics, and education—all that humanity pursues—is destruction. It tells the professional athlete, the Silicon Valley gazillionaire, the political elite, "Your world, your achievements will be vapor when Jesus comes back. Repent, honor the true God and King, and serve him." No one can follow Christ without his or her life being disrupted, for following Christ is renouncing all that we have been pursuing as our god.

The gospel annihilates all forms of self-righteousness and self-salvation. This is part of how we preach against sin.

Christianity is not a religion; it's the proclamation of the end of religion. Religion is the human activity of reconciling God to humanity and humanity to itself. The Gospel is the astonishing announcement that God has done the whole work of reconciliation without a scrap of human assistance. . . . All the efforts of the human race to straighten up the mess of history by plausible religious devices have been cancelled by God for lack of saving interest. More astonishingly still, their purpose has been

fulfilled, once for all and free for nothing, by the totally non-religious death of resurrection of a Galilean nobody.<sup>5</sup>

How do I know if I am preaching Christ? Let me offer some ideas of what Christ-centered preaching is and is not, beginning with what it is not.

*Preaching Christ is not a simple evangelistic sermon every week.* My first idea of preaching Christ was “evangelistic” preaching. A simple message each week, calling sinners to repent. There are churches where this is the norm. I had a strong conviction, however, about the pulpit being a place where Christians are fed. There is milk and there is meat. I had seen the fruit of simplistic ministries and wanted no part in it.

Moreover, it is more than a gospel add-on. Here is what that looks like. At the end of a sermon, we switch gears, telling people about sin and redemption. For example, after speaking on “principles of stewardship,” we turn the subject to the unbeliever, “You may be here this morning not knowing Christ. This sermon is not for you. You need Jesus.” This is a second sermon. This is an add-on. One friend says the gospel at the end of a sermon should be a bookend, not an add-on. The gospel should be woven into the fabric of every sermon, exploring its meaning and depth. Believers need to hear the gospel all the time as well, for their obedience is always in need of cleansing.

*Preaching Christ is not the same as detailed expository preaching.* Preaching verse-by-verse is no guarantee. This is scary. I discovered that I could preach through the Bible, book-by-book and verse-by-verse, and miss the point. This expository preaching focuses on the details of the Bible. It is didactic and careful.<sup>6</sup> When I preach this way, I focus on the text and can lose the Lord in the Word. If I am careful with the text, I will point out Christ in all things.

*Preaching Christ is not the same as preaching about God.* Preaching Christ is more than a rehearsal of theological points. I have loved the God-centeredness of Calvinism. My early life was gripped by Tozer’s fire for God’s majesty. I have

benefited from books on the character of God. Edwards’ words about delighting in God have seized my heart.

Yet unless it points me to Christ, it is not preaching Christ. I can focus on the majesty and sovereignty of God. I can speak of the glory of God and delighting in God. I can even speak of the grace of God. I can even preach the five points of Calvinism and miss Jesus. The New Testament says that Christ is to have preeminence in all things. Christ is not God in generic revelation, but God the Son.

Let me add one more point. In our day, the preacher must labor at his vocabulary to describe the gospel. Theological jargon is not understood. People, even mature believers, are secular in their worldview. They need windows to see what the truth of the gospel looks like in our day. We need to look for the redemptive analogies and gospel connections in our culture.

*Preaching Christ is not the same as being “practical.”* The old word for this is preaching the law—its duties, and precepts. Most common these days is “how to” preaching, massive attempts to make Christianity relevant to the church and unchurched. The slogan behind it is simple: Doctrine is boring and turns people off. No more dry doctrine!

This means messages on topics of general interest: conflict management, money matters, life purpose, marriage and family. We must scratch where people itch. The fabric for preaching is usually the commands or wisdom of the Bible.

The motives of such preaching are wonderful—to connect the gospel with the secular people of our day and show the relevance of Christianity. The reasons are legitimate—there is a great deal of preaching in code language, divorced from life; some preaching of that kind would be just as “real” if the room was filled with computers, because that kind of preaching, unlike the Bible, is disembodied from flesh and blood, schedule and conflicts, people and pleasures.

Preaching “relevance,” However, may actually be removing Christ from the message. The impression may be given that the Bible offers “maxims for a better life,” suggesting Christians are people who live out its wisdom and enjoy

personal improvement before God. When this is a steady diet, the outcome is a cheapening of the message, a loss of glory. If sin is not the main problem, the cross is not the focus. In the midst of "relevance," where is the conquering Lord of heaven who calls all to abandon their idolatrous pursuits and swear allegiance to him?

We can turn the Bible into a series of character lessons. This is especially true of preaching the Old Testament. Turning the life of Joshua into a series of moral lessons misses the point. Joshua was a failure. So was David. They did not live sinlessly. They failed to complete their task or to walk in holiness. The Old Testament says, "The Messiah has not yet come. Look to him." How does our preaching compare with the use of the Old Testament by Jesus or the Apostles?

I do not think the Bible is impractical, but Christianity practices a message. Strip away the theology of redemption from the New Testament and you get a watered down version of Christianity. You end up with a lie. Says Bishop Horne, "Whoever preaches and enforces moral duties, without justification and sanctification preceding, may as well declaim the advantages of walking to a man that can neither stir hand nor foot." (Bridges, 265) The gospel is the source of holiness and to fail to remind people of this is to preach another religion. Brian Chapell notes, "Instruction in biblical behavior barren of redemptive truth only wounds, and . . . such preaching either promotes pharisaism or prompts despair."<sup>7</sup>

Saints need to hear of Christ often. They know that the best of their obedience is marred and tarnished by sin. They know that no matter how hard we may try, the battle against indwelling sin is relentless. "I love to tell the story/ for those who know it best/ seem hungering and thirsting/ to hear it like the rest." I talk to many Christians these days. They are trying so hard. They seem burdened. They do not seem desperately dependent. They are trying so hard to be good Christians. They are full of self-reliance. This is the fruit of practical, relevant preaching which leaves Jesus at the new birth and loads up the saints with "relevant principles" un-tethered from Christ. It is the preaching of the law without the cross.<sup>8</sup>

So what is preaching Christ? What does it look like?

*We preach Christ when we proclaim a Person.* My reflections in Scripture have taken me to the Gospels. For years I wondered why we had these accounts. I understood the epistles, but the Gospels seemed to be a lot of repetitive stories.

These are a revelation of Christ and the nature of the Kingdom of God, which he inaugurates and will consummate at the end of the age. The Gospels are the foundation for preaching Christ. They tell us about Jesus. To Cornelius, Peter preached Jesus the Person, who "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38).

Jesus is the Good News. God himself has stepped into the world, taken on flesh and blood, lived and suffered and died and rose from death. Jesus is the Word made flesh, revealer of the glory of God. His every word and deed is a picture of the heart of God. The message of the Gospels is this: *Will you trust this Jesus?*

Trust is personal. I have a friend who is one of the most client-centered securities brokers I know. He seems usually to make choices that are in my best interest. His principles and ideas are not profound. But I trust him to serve me. I know others who interrupt my dinner with a phone call, asking to assume the oversight of my IRA. They have great ideas, but I do not trust them. Why would I give my retirement plans into the hands of a stranger? I tell others about my friend, encouraging their trust. Faith is *trust*. When Jesus said "follow me," he invites us to trust him.

When I preach Christ, I tell unbelievers about Jesus, his person, character, achievement—and ask them to trust him completely. When I preach Christ to believers, I remind them of the One who is their Savior and what he is for them. I speak of his example and its meaning to those who are beloved by him without merit on their part. I ask them to trust and follow.

Listen to the words of Bishop Reynolds, a seventeenth-century church leader, on how to preach so that trust is the response:

So convince [your hearers] of the all-sufficient righteousness and unsearchable riches of Christ, the excellency of his knowledge, the immeasurableness of his love, the preciousness of his promises, the "fellowship of his suffering, the power of his resurrection," the beauties of his holiness, the easiness of his yoke, the sweetness of his peace, the joy of his salvation, the hope of his glory—that the hearts of your hearers may burn within them, . . .—that they may with all ready obedience, and by the constraining power of the love of Christ, yield up themselves to the government of this Prince of Peace . . . nor live any longer unto themselves but unto him that "loved us, and died for us, and rose again."<sup>9</sup>

Those of us who love theology are always in danger of reducing the gospel to a set of principles. Systematic theology appeals to those who love to study and think. Creating a coherent system may cater to the pride of intellect. When we have systematized truth, do we proclaim something that seems as personal as a lecture on philosophy? Is it possible to lose the excellence of Christ in our excellent theology?

*We preach Christ when we proclaim the epic of redemption, his mission and kingdom.* It is clear that the four records of the life of Jesus are not epistles—but we often preach them that way. They are stories of Jesus, giving us a picture of his mission. The rest of the New Testament reminds us that his purpose was cosmic—the removal of the curse from the cosmos and the creation of a new heaven and earth. This is the "big picture."

A few years ago, I sat with a veteran of Omaha Beach. June 6 was a day he would never forget. If I had said to him, "Oh, that was just about taking a beach," he would have taken offense. It was more than taking a beach. It was about winning the war. It was the only possible way to defeat Hitler, establishing a beachhead on the Continent. The big picture transformed his perspective on that bloody battle.

The Gospels tell us that his life was a frontal war on the kingdom of darkness. Jesus came into a world ruled by a self-serving power-monger. The devil had legal right to his dominion, founded on Adam's violation of the command of God.

His kingdom looked just like his heart: malevolence, lies and murder. His citizens are afflicted with disease, oppressed by his minions, tossed by storms, and ruled by death. Jesus came to rescue a people of his own from the Dark Lord.

The life of Jesus was hand-to-hand combat with the Prince of Darkness. He defeated him in the wilderness temptations. He bound his power and began to plunder his house. This house, however, was a prison. Jesus released the lepers, blind, deaf, and mute, demonized. He refuted the false religion instituted by the evil one. His miracles and teaching revealed the character of his kingdom by showing the heart of the king—he sets free, leads to holiness, enables men and women to be renewed in the image of God.

He achieved this by bearing perfect humanity and complete deity in one person to the cross where he, the Innocent One, suffered as though guilty of the transgressions of man. He took away the charges against us, satisfied the wrath of God, broke the legal power of the Dark Lord to rule, and began his new kingdom in the day of Resurrection. He died to rescue me from wrath but he died to do so much more than that.

*I preach Christ when I focus first on what he has done.* We yearn for the practical. People beg me for a "so what do I do with this?" approach. I find it helpful to forget about what I do and focus on what he has done. I once preached a series on the work of Christ. As I introduced each message, I told the congregation I did not want them to do anything! My desire was that they look at what Jesus achieved.

It is so easy to turn everything into practicalities. A year ago, I preached on the temptation of Christ. With this new grid of interpretation, I found the narrative is not, first, about "how Christians face temptation." It is about him, my second Adam, standing against the devil in victory. Hebrews explains this: Jesus is the forerunner, having been tempted in all points as we but without sin. This Jesus has overcome. He will lead me to overcome, not because I flawlessly resist all evil, but because he did.

Therefore, I preached his victory, triumph, and his keeping

power first. Then I preached his pattern for our obedience: he faced every temptation with the Word. In addition, I unmask the devil's subtleties to aid believers in their pursuit of holiness in the Spirit's power. And I assured my people that his perfect obedience is our standing before God as we will fail in resisting temptation.

Does our preaching make people preoccupied with Jesus or with their "selves"?

*I preach Christ when I trace a line to him from every topic in theology.* Since I have warned of the dangers of preaching theology, let me offer a path for teaching theology in a Christ saturated manner. It is simple: All things find their consummation and explanation in Christ. For example:

- If I preach on the Trinity, I might proclaim the love of the Father in giving his Son, pouring out his wrath on him, even when the Father and Son had shared love and glory before there was time.
- When I preach on the truth and authority of the Word of God, I might proclaim the graciousness of that Word. A holy God could have judged us by silence, offering no revelation of himself to those who shunned him.
- When I speak of the doctrine of man I might portray his created glory (yes, glory as in Psalm 8) ruined by sin. Humankind is tragic, a wasteland with traces of the image of God in the midst of a landscape annihilated by evil. In addition, I might speak of the mercy of God to us in our sin.
- When I preach on the doctrine of angels, I might show the holy hatred of God for sin by cursing even angels or, alternatively, speak of the holy angels, wonder-filled observers in the drama of redemption.
- When I speak of the church I must preach that we are the elect people, the people purchased by his blood, rescued from the Lord of Darkness, heirs of the future consummated kingdom and the present reign of Christ.

- When we preach eschatology, I must preach the person who returns and the consummation of his reign, not the timelines and current events to which we attribute significance. He is the blessed hope. His appearing, when faith shall be turned to sight, in our expectation—whether pre-, a-, or post-millennial.

The point is clear: theology without Christ is not biblical. Theology with Christ is wonderful.

*I preach Christ when I trace a line to him from every topic in the culture.* The world is filled with gospel themes. Yet I have seen Christians become critical of false ideas in the culture, whether the pop psychology of the co-dependency movement or the false hope of right wing politics. More than being critical, we have to ask why such ideas are appealing to so many. What are the redemptive questions being asked? How can I bridge the gospel to this idea? How can I use the language of the movement to speak about Christ?

Take, for example, the co-dependency movement. While it is unfortunate that Christians adopted this and sanctified it with a few Scripture verses, it is no better to reject it wholesale. Look at it through redemptive eyes. Co-dependency is an analysis of problems people have with themselves in relationships. It has a diagnosis and a treatment. The diagnosis is superficial and the treatment is self-salvation. If I can use the "awareness" created by the movement, show its weaknesses, and point to the real diagnosis and treatment—I become an effective witness in our day.

People are incurably religious. Secular people play out their sense of having something wrong with themselves every day. They have "salvation" in some idea or some method. If we can enter their heads, and use their awareness, we can become effective communicators, under the blessing of the Spirit.

*I preach Christ when I join him in assaulting all self-righteousness and self-help.* We understand Jesus is the Savior of sinners—but what about those "good" people who have a pleasant life in the suburbs with pleasant children and a pleasant job?

This was my life before my conversion. I was a nice person. I have always felt condemned to a life of little love because those who have been forgiven little, love little. I have combed my past for great sins, exaggerating what was there to give me a sense of my wickedness.

Then I saw my real sin: I had insulted Christ for years by constructing my own righteousness. I rebelled by being nice. My life was a pride-filled vaunting of myself before God. My conversion meant acknowledging that I was a great sinner by pursuing my own righteousness.

The most moral, ethical, biblically literate, religiously disciplined people of Jesus' day hated him the most. He tore down the false righteousness of fabricated moral goodness and religion. He exposed the dark souls of the good. He tore away at greed and self-righteousness. He did so that they might be clothed in him.

I think good preachers ought to be like bad kids. They ought to be naughty enough to tiptoe up to dozing congregations, steal their bottles of religion pills, spirituality pills, and morality pills, and flush them down the drain. The church, mostly, has drugged itself into thinking that proper human behavior is the key to its relationship with God. What preachers need to do is force it to go cold turkey with nothing but the word of the cross.<sup>10</sup>

I would like to suggest that the recent spate of "how-to" sermons has missed its opportunity. The reality is that the best and most practical preaching of the most relevant topics leaves people empty. They cannot live up to the practice called for. It is an open door to call them out of themselves and to Christ.

Self-righteousness is a great sin among the saints. I preached once on repenting of our righteousness. I think this is the call of the gospel to nice people. I think this is the call of the gospel to Christians with some measure of maturity who think they are good enough. Paul said his goal was to be found only in the righteousness of Christ (Philippians 3:9-10). My guess is that Paul repudiated his own righteousness every day, confessed his sin, and clung to the cross.

*I preach Christ when I call for blood-washed, Spirit-empowered holiness.* There is obviously a place for preaching the commands of God to the saints. The gospel calls for specific obedience. It is not vague; it is intensely demanding. The law is the measure of our holiness.

When we preach the obedience of faith, however, let us be sure to give the motives the Apostles give. Call people to humility by focusing them on the humility of Jesus (Philippians 2:1-11). Call people to love by focusing on the love of Christ (1 John 3:16-18). Call people to silence under injustice by pointing them to his meekness in suffering (1 Peter 2:18-25). Let us teach people to trust the Spirit and the Word. There is a difference between blood motivated preaching unto holiness and bloodless moral improvement.

The Bible does not say, "Husbands love your wives; wives submit to your husbands." It says, "Husbands love your wives as Christ loves the church, wives submit to your own husbands as unto the Lord." If we preach the former, we are preaching error. We are no different from Mormons. If we preach the latter, we will and must point people to reflect on Jesus before we call them to follow him.

The mission and kingdom of Christ call us to live as rescued from this present evil age and with no fellowship with the works of the devil, which he came to destroy. Passion for holiness is what he creates in us by the Spirit. When I honor the Spirit, I honor Christ. Again, I must preach the call to holiness along with the promise of his intercession and cleansing of my imperfect obedience, or I may drive the saints to despair.

*I preach Christ when I preach the meaning of the Resurrection.* A friend told me that the average Christian has a hard time understanding the significance of the Resurrection. That is because we interpret it in a "small picture"—my salvation and me: "Of course Jesus rose, so he can be my Savior." It is far more than that.

When I began to see Jesus' mission and message as kingdom focused, I noticed something very significant. All the accounts of the Resurrection make it very clear that it takes

place on the first day of the week. In biblical categories, the first day of the week is the beginning of the creation. Jesus' Resurrection is the beginning of the new creation. He has started his reign. The darkness is passing away. The day is at hand. We are in the last chapter of history. The next event will be the return of Jesus and the consummation of his kingdom (on this all agree, but with different senses of "kingdom").

This means that this world is almost over. Jesus delivers us from the present evil age. The ends of the ages have come upon us. The things we cling to have no value. They will perish with burning. It is impossible to preach Christ without being against the world.

This means that *preaching Christ is a direct assault on the idolatry of man*. I live in Silicon Valley, home of more hype and pride than any community in the USA. We have wealthy men who think they will be able to put an end to death with their money. Some say Silicon Valley is secular. I find it intensely religious.

I love the scene in Revelation 4-5 where the twenty-four elders and four living creatures worship God the Creator and the Lamb. That worship multiplies to all living beings, they sing "worthy," and they ascribe to the Lamb strength, honor, power, glory, and riches.

I see that scene every day where I live. You do too. Instead of God and the Lamb, people are casting their crowns before other objects of wonder to their hearts. They say, "Worthy are you, Barry Bonds, to receive power for you have broken the home run record." "Worthy are you, Bill Gates, to be worshiped for you have riches." People are busy worshiping what they think is rich, wealthy, powerful, honorable, noteworthy. It is intense!

If I preach Christ, I must call people, believers and unbelievers, to repudiate all other objects of worship. To give worship to man, to human technology, to our abilities and discoveries and knowledge—this is the height of idolatry. Moreover, to ignore the glory of Christ is the height of insult to God.

When I preach Christ, I make clear that he did not come to put a new coat of paint on this world, but to overthrow the

world system and establish his kingdom. I am serving notice to the unbelieving that all that they value and the evil Lord that rules them are about to be put to an end—and that the Lord Jesus offers himself to them as a good and merciful and righteous Lord and Savior.

*I preach Christ when I preach in suffering and weakness.* Modern thought about ministry is triumphalistic. We strive for success, not faithfulness. We tell of our conquests, not our crosses. We climb the ladder of bigger and better churches.

New Testament ministry is cruciform. It is in the steps of Jesus who conquered by weakness. In this time when his glory is invisible, the Lord of the church advances his kingdom and builds his church through suffering and weakness.

This is the message of 2 Corinthians. Super apostles snared the Corinthians, offering to them a "kingdom now" theology (call it health and wealth, if you will). Paul rebukes them by speaking of his weakness and present afflictions as the basis of the power of God in his life. Preaching Christ requires entering into his sufferings, and experiencing the power of the resurrection in our agony. This is my lot as a pastor.

Recent years have opened this up to me more fully. There is real heartache to ministry. Faithful labors are useless and rejected unless the Spirit pours out his blessing. The conditions in which we serve are unfriendly. Progress is often slow. Self-doubt tears at the heart. But God may do his greatest work when we are most weak.

*I preach Christ in the power of the Spirit.* All of this drives us to the Spirit to do his work. It drives us to pray. It drives us out of self-sufficiency (a lesson I find very hard to learn as I pray earnestly only for a while and then fall back on my own abilities when my mood is less desperate). The Holy Spirit floodlights Jesus. If we do not give him anything to work with, he cannot be the advocate.

As I read Paul's philosophy of ministry in 1 Corinthians 1-2, I see a depth of honoring the Spirit that is alien to me. He dared not manipulate the message or he would lose the unction of the Spirit. He dared not seek any other power to attract to the crucified Savior. For Paul, ministry was placing himself

in a position where all he had was hope and confidence in the Spirit of God.

#### WHAT MUST WE DO?

I believe that the simplest action necessary for us preachers is this: *Preach the gospel to yourself every day.* We never have a day where we do not need the gospel, and our worst sin does not disqualify us from grace. Our failings and transgressions are reminders that Christ alone is our righteousness. I wonder, because I know my own thoughts, how much self-righteousness is in me? I wonder how much my heart is melted by the flow of grace from the wounds of my Savior? We cannot express what we do not impress upon our hearts.

We must also evaluate every message with a few simple questions:

- How does this message reflect the fact that our salvation was purchased by the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus?
- How does this message point people to Jesus, in his glory, as the life and power of the believer and the church?
- Does this message make clear “gospel connections” with the passage, avoiding moralism, powerlessness, self-righteousness?
- Does this message lead people to look outside of themselves to Christ, to trust and follow him?

#### WHAT MAY WE EXPECT?

If we are New Testament pastors and teachers, we are to preach Christ. If we are preaching Christ and the Spirit of God comes to make the Word powerful, these kinds of things will happen:

- Listeners will have their eyes of faith filled with the beauty and excellence of Jesus Christ. They will be full of wonder.

- Their lives will be preoccupied with what he has done and not with what they must do.
- They will live by faith in the truth and not live by faith in their feelings about the truth.
- They will have contrite hearts, broken for the mercy they have known.
- They will have confidence and boldness.
- They will affirm the ministry of the Advocate, the Spirit of Christ.
- They will cooperate with the Spirit in seeing the fruit of his work filled out in their lives, putting sin to death, putting on righteousness.
- They will have a sincere love for all who are in Christ.
- They will be compelled to love the lost around them as Jesus loved them.
- Some will find it foolishness.

#### DESPAIR OR HOPE?

A few weeks ago, we sat in a church and listened to a missionary’s message. The speaker was smooth and his style relational. It seemed we were lounging in a Jacuzzi together. He shared his testimony and spoke about missions. He said absolutely nothing clearly. Here was his conversion story, “My dad gave me this book by Hal Lindsey. I read it. Lindsey believed the world was bad too. He had this invitation at the end of the book. I turned to the wall and talked with God. Everything has been different since.” It did not get any clearer. The entire congregation applauded at the end.

I had only one question: *What was he talking about?* I could read into his testimony the person and work of Christ, but I would also walk away thinking salvation came by talking to God facing a wall. People applauded! Perhaps they read into his story. Christ was grieved. He was absent.

What I hope for is a rediscovery of Christ in all things in the church. I do not doubt that believers instinctively refer all

to Christ. What I do doubt is that pastors help them. Let us unfold the message of the cross in all its fullness, much as one of the new songs does. Can this be boring? Can this be irrelevant?

In Christ alone, my hope is found.  
He is my strength, my light, my song,  
This cornerstone, this solid ground,  
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.  
What heights of love, What depths of peace,  
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease.  
My Comforter, my all in all,  
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone!—who took on flesh,  
Fullness of God in helpless babe!  
This gift of love and righteousness,  
Scorned by the ones He came to save.  
Till on that cross, as Jesus died,  
The wrath of God was satisfied,  
For every sin on Him was laid—  
Here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground His body lay,  
Light of the world by darkness slain:  
Then bursting forth in glorious day,  
Up from the grave He rose again!  
And as He stands in victory,  
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,  
For I am His and He is mine—  
Bought with the precious blood of Christ.

No guilt in life, no fear in death,  
This is the power of Christ in me;  
From life's first cry to final breath,  
Jesus commands my destiny.  
No power of hell, no scheme of man,  
Can ever pluck me from His hand;

Till He returns or calls me home,  
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand!

—Stuart Townsend, *Kingsway Music*

#### Author

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#### Notes

1. Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 2001), 240.
2. Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, 241.
3. C. J. Mahaney, one of their leadership team, has just written *The Cross-Centered Life*, Multnomah Press, 2002. Their music, available through the website, [www.pdinet.org](http://www.pdinet.org), is new and soaked in the gospel.
4. Tim Keller's articles on this theme can be downloaded from the Redeemer website, [www.redeemer.com](http://www.redeemer.com).
5. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Astonished Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 2.
6. Graeme Goldsworthy notes this danger to expository verse by verse preaching. *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 59.
7. Brian Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 1994), 285.
8. For an elaboration of this theme see Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (NavPress: Colorado Springs, 1994), especially chapter 3.
9. Cited in Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, 258.
10. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Foolishness of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 11, 14.