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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PREACH CHRIST?

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What Does It Mean to Preach Christ?

*“Whom we preach, warning every man, and
teaching every man in all wisdom.”*

—Colossians 1:28

You have been pursuing an education of mind and heart, preparatory to the office of a minister of the Gospel. You are now upon the threshold of that sacred work. How far your ministry will be that of a faithful ‘steward of the mysteries of God’ will depend on how far it shall be the faithful preaching of Jesus Christ. No inquiry, therefore, in the course of your preparation, or at this stage of your career, should seem to you of such importance as that which seeks a full understanding of the work of preaching Christ Jesus our Lord and Saviour, according as it is taught in the Scriptures and set forth before us in the example of the apostles. It is an inquiry with which the work of a minister of Christ will be more and more identified as he himself shall grow in the mind of his Master, and in a personal experience of the power and preciousness of the grace revealed in him.¹

It is Monday afternoon, March 25, 1861. A young man stands to speak in the pulpit of a newly constructed church building, designed to hold the thousands already thronging to hear his ministry. Already much blessed of God, he will continue to be mightily used by the Lord to the saving and sanctifying of multitudes of sinners. His labors for the advance of Christ’s kingdom will be prodigious:² after twenty-five years in London, he will preside over sixty-six institutions founded on Gospel principles and operating from Gospel motives. Books and articles will pour from his pen and be readily consumed; his sermons will be heard by thousands, written down and then distributed—many in translation—and eagerly read to the ends of the earth for decades after his death. He will be described by competent judges in glowing terms: “Never since Paul died has so much work and so much success been crowded into so small a space of time.”³

Who is this man, and what lies at the root of his Gospel effectiveness? He is Charles Haddon Spurgeon,⁴ and his secret is quickly revealed as he opens his mouth to utter the first formal words of a sermon in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, preaching on Acts 5:42: “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.” He says:

I do not know whether there are any persons here present who can contrive to put themselves into my present position, and to feel my present feelings. If they can effect that, they will give me credit for meaning what I say, when I declare that I feel totally unable to preach. And, indeed, I think I shall scarcely attempt a sermon, but rather give a sort of declaration of the truths from which future sermons shall be made. I will give you bullion rather than coin; the block from the quarry, and not the statue from the chisel. It appears that the one subject upon which men preached in the apostolic age was Jesus Christ...In the days of Paul, it was not difficult at once, in one word, to give the sum and substance of the current theology. It was Christ Jesus. Had you asked anyone of those disciples what he believed, he would have replied, “I believe Christ.” If you had requested him to show you his Body of Divinity, he would have pointed upward, reminding you that divinity never had but one body, the suffering and crucified human frame of Jesus Christ, who ascended up on high...

I would propose (and O may the Lord grant us grace to carry out that proposition, from which no Christian can dissent), I would propose that the subject of the ministry of this house, as long as this platform shall stand, and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshippers, shall be the person of Jesus Christ. I am never ashamed to avow myself a Calvinist, although I claim to be rather a Calvinist according to Calvin,⁵ than after the modern de-based fashion. I do not hesitate to take the name of Baptist. You have there [pointing to the baptistery] substantial evidence that I am not ashamed of that ordinance of our Lord Jesus Christ; but if I am asked to say what my creed

¹ Charles P. McIlvaine, *Preaching Christ: The Heart of Gospel Ministry—An Address to Those Entering the Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2003), 1–2.

² **prodigious** – remarkably or impressively great in extent; astonishing.

³ Pilgrim Publications, B. H. Carroll, Memorial Address, 1892, quoted in “Introduction to C. H. Spurgeon,” www.pilgrimpublications.com/about/c-h-spurgeon-biography-page/introduction-to-c-h-spurgeon (accessed May 25, 2009).

⁴ **Charles Haddon Spurgeon** (1834-1892) – highly influential English Baptist preacher.

⁵ **John Calvin** (1509-1564) – French theologian, preacher, and pastor during the Protestant Reformation; author of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

is, I think I must reply, “It is Jesus Christ.” My venerable predecessor, Dr. Gill,⁶ has left a body of divinity admirable and excellent in its way; but the body of divinity to which I would pin and bind myself for ever, God helping me, is not his system of divinity or any other human treatise, but Christ Jesus, who is the sum and substance of the Gospel; who is in himself all theology, the incarnation of every precious truth, the all-glorious personal embodiment of the way, the truth, and the life.⁷

What lay at the heart of Charles Spurgeon’s wide-ranging and powerfully effective Gospel ministry? The answer is quite simple: Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ was the focal point of all his preaching. Spurgeon loved Christ, followed Christ, obeyed Christ, and, as a true minister of the Gospel, he proclaimed Christ. Spurgeon was in good company, standing in a long tradition of faithful men who had also embraced the same cause and preached the same glorious person.

As Spurgeon makes plain, he follows the Apostle Paul, who preached the Jesus who died but rose again. In Colossians 1:27, Paul had spoken of God’s intention that the riches of the glory of the age-old mystery of the redemption of the Gentiles in Jesus the Messiah should be made known. Now, in verse 28, he discloses that this great Savior “whom we preach” is himself the absolute core and definitive summary of all his proclamation. The will of God for the making known of his Son in the earth finds its human counterpart in the work of Paul and his fellow servants.

We must recognize the polemical⁸ point being made by the apostle as he refutes the false teachers who were attacking this church with their flawed notions of salvation. These errorists had much to say about the supposed virtues of circumcision, angel worship, and asceticism⁹ as ways to obtain a right standing with God (*see* Col 2:14-23). In this, they denied Christ’s preeminence and his exclusive role as the only way to the Father. Paul says, in effect, “Away with these counterfeit saviors! There is but one Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he is, therefore, the sum and substance of my preaching and teaching.”

So must it be for all true pastors. In these words, Paul is emphasizing the difference between his preaching and that of the false teachers. The very order of Paul’s words is intended to get this message across, although not every translation communicates its force. He might very naturally say, “We preach Christ,” and the sense would be fundamentally the same. However, Paul puts Jesus up front where He belongs: “*him* we preach.” Jesus Christ the Lord is the great burden of Paul’s preaching. He is the one whom Paul and his companions were unashamedly proclaiming to all and doing so by means of “warning” and “teaching” (Col 1:28).

Paul is here setting out the tools that he employs in making known Jesus Christ: proclamation, admonition, and instruction. The apostle’s work is *constant*: his language indicates that it is his habitual and ongoing practice to engage in the work by these means, the overarching demand of proclaiming Jesus and the subsidiary demands of warning and teaching. Paul’s work is *broad*: he uses these tools on “every man.” There is none of the false exclusivity that characterized the Colossian errorists, no sense of a spiritual aristocracy. All truth is brought to bear, without exception, on all men—whether Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian,¹⁰ slave, or free (Col 3:11). Furthermore, Paul’s work is *focused*: these tools are individually employed. Paul deals with individuals, such as Philemon and Onesimus, the former a member of this church and the latter his runaway but now converted slave. These Gospel means are for every man and are brought to bear upon particular men, each being the object of their particular and intelligent application.

Proclamation

What does it mean to preach? The word Paul uses when he declares “whom we preach” indicates an official, authoritative declaration that is to be proclaimed or announced. The word can refer to the message of one who speaks on behalf of another, such as an ambassador or herald. It literally means “to make known,” “to tell out,” “to communicate,” or “to proclaim,” bringing a message aloud or publicly. You might almost describe it as the technical term for what some today would call missional preaching—the preaching that brings the Gospel clearly to bear upon those who have never before come face to face with Christ in all his saving fullness.

Paul is speaking of the solemn, public declaration of authoritative truth. As an apostle of Jesus Christ, he was authorized by the Lord to communicate on his behalf. As one of heaven’s ambassadors, he—commissioned in the same way as the other apostles—would go from town to town publicly declaring the message that Jesus had called him to deliver. Paul’s task was to make Christ known to fallen humanity, to those estranged from God. Traveling across the Roman Empire, he proclaimed to all what Jesus had done to procure peace with an offended God through his sacrificial death, making known the personal terms of reconciliation with this holy, just, and gracious Sovereign.

⁶ John Gill (1697-1771) – Baptist minister, theologian, and author of *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity, The Cause of God and Truth, and the multi-volume Expositions of the Old and New Testaments.*

⁷ “The First Sermon in the Tabernacle” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (1861; reprint, Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1995), 7:169.

⁸ **polemical** – relating to a controversy, argument, or refutation.

⁹ **asceticism** – the belief that through renunciation of worldly pleasures it is possible to achieve a high spiritual state.

¹⁰ **Scythian** – a person who is a native of ancient Scythia, a region north of the Black Sea, and regarded by the Greco-Roman world as utterly pagan and uncivilized.

Paul and his fellow ministers did not merely mutter their words quietly to a few. They did not just gather a group of people for a little chat or a Gospel talk (although this task does not necessarily demand a great crowd in order to accomplish it). This was not simply conversation; it was not even primarily public dialogue and debate, although both conversation and debate clearly were weapons in the apostolic armory. Rather, Paul is speaking here of how he and his comrades, in reliance upon God the Holy Spirit, boldly and fearlessly announced the message about the only Savior of sinners, Jesus Christ our Lord.

What does it mean to preach Christ?

This declaration of Jesus is the central duty of the true servant of the Lord. So what does this actually mean? To preach Christ is to proclaim the great truths about and the profound implications of his glorious person and finished redemptive work in the place of sinners on the cross of Calvary, making him known as He is set forth in the entirety of the Scriptures.

The message declared is God's saving purpose in Christ. Paul and those who genuinely follow him never proclaim a mere system or a set of rules, still less the muddled¹¹ nonsense being spewed out by heretics. Paul and his fellow laborers do not preach philosophy. They do not preach politics. They do not preach positive thinking. They do not preach themselves. Preaching is not the exercise of the preacher's fancy, the fevered labor of an overwrought imagination. It is not empty speculation about spiritual hierarchies and angelic powers. There is no specious¹² spinning out of superficial theories that do nothing but excite and tantalize carnal minds.

Gospel ministers declare a person, a living person who is the source of all true life, in whom is found the hope of glory, the only fulfillment of the deepest needs of sinful men. That person is Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, the only redeemer of God's elect. Remember that Paul has already set him forth in some of the highest and brightest Christology¹³ of the New Testament, declaring him to be God's dear Son,

"in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.¹⁴ For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven" (Col 1:13-20).

It is this Jesus and none other, the head of the first creation and the head of the new creation (Col 1:15-16), who indwells his people from every kingdom and tribe and tongue and nation and is their hope of glory. He is the sum and substance of the message proclaimed.

This matter reveals the crucial difference between a true servant of Christ and a false one. This standard remains absolute and is no less important in our day than it was in Paul's. From many of the world's pulpits, chaff is sown instead of seed, and people are fed the dry husks of manmade religion rather than Christ-centered truth through Christ-saturated sermons. Neither Paul nor his fellow workers would ever be party to such a thing. Where Christ is marginalized,¹⁵ all true, biblical, genuinely Christian religion is quickly lost, shrouded in bewildering clouds of mystical emptiness. The liquid that is offered to sinners under such circumstances claims to quench the thirst, but men are easing their spiritual appetites not with living water but with virulent poison. Such teaching produces no salvation.

When Christ is proclaimed, it is made plain that all that is necessary for salvation in the fullest and most complete sense is found in him alone. Such a message necessarily excludes everyone and everything else and exalts him solely: "Neither is there salvation in any other [but in Jesus Christ of Nazareth]: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Act 4:12):

This Christ, so glorious in person and perfect in work—the incarnate God—the bleeding peacemaker—the imperial governor of the universe—it is he, none else, and none besides him, whom we preach. Not simply his doctrine, but himself; and he was preached, not by Paul alone, but by all his colleagues. This Christ is the one and undivided object of proclamation; and if he be the hope of glory, no wonder that they rejoice to proclaim him wide and far, and on every possible occasion. The apostolic preaching was precise and definite...Christ, as the one deliverer, conferring pardon by his blood, purity by his Spirit, and perfection by his pledge and presence, securing defense by his power, comfort by his sympathy, and the hope of glory by his residence in the believing heart.¹⁶

This was always the Gospel message. We find such a message in the teaching of our Lord himself, as well as of his apostles.

¹¹ **muddled** – confused and vague.

¹² **specious** – seeming to be true, when not really being so.

¹³ **Christology** – the part of theology that relates to the person, nature, and work of Jesus Christ.

¹⁴ **preeminence** – first place; the highest rank.

¹⁵ **marginalized** – treated as insignificant.

¹⁶ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of Paul's Letter to the Colossians* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2005), 101–102.

It may seem odd to state that Jesus preached himself, but there is nothing strange or inherently arrogant in such activity. As the incarnate Son of God, he alone is warranted—indeed, required—to proclaim himself. We thus find him expounding himself to others.

Consider two key passages. The first is found in the Gospel according to John. Chapter 5 records that our Lord has been pleased to heal a man at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath. This gives rise to violent antagonism from and a heated debate with the religious leaders of the day. We read that, because of this healing and its immediate aftermath, “the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the sabbath day. But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work. Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God” (Joh 5:16-18). As our Lord goes on to validate his undeniable equality with the Father, he says to these leaders, “The Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape. And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not. Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me” (Joh 5:37-39).

The Lord Jesus points out the key reason the Jewish leaders had not responded favorably to him. It was not that they lacked information. Indeed, they had the right information—the very oracles of God (Rom 3:2)—but they read it wrongly. He says to them that they were searching the Scriptures because in them they thought that they had eternal life, and—says our Lord—these Scriptures “are they which testify of *me*.” These religious leaders did a right and necessary thing in reading their Bibles. Nevertheless, these diligent readers and teachers of the Old Testament fell short when it came to understanding those Bibles. This was no slight hermeneutical defect,¹⁷ but a soul-damning flaw. Their study of the Old Testament missed the mark completely because it missed the main Actor. They were like men studying the solar system by means of accurate diagrams but without ever recognizing the centrality of the sun and without ever enjoying its light and feeling its heat. All their efforts did not lead them to look to Jesus as Messiah, did not prompt them to lay hold of the salvation that is found in him alone.

Our Lord tells them in no uncertain terms that if they had correctly understood their Bibles then they would have come to him to be saved, for it is he of whom the Scriptures speak: “They...testify of me.” The Bible in its entirety—the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments—is the full revelation of God the Son. Jesus says to these deluded and angry men that a correct reading of the Old Testament would have led them to see plainly that he was the promised Messiah of God.

The Bible remains a closed book to those who do not embrace its main focus. When a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away; but until then the veil remains (2Co 3:15-16). The Lord Christ reiterates that he is the beating heart of the Old Testament and its primary concern when in this same chapter he tells his opponents that “had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?” (Joh 5:46-47). F. F. Bruce effectively summarizes the grievous reality of this encounter: “The tragedy was that these people, for all their painstaking exploration of the sacred writings, had never found the clue which would lead them to their goal. The goal at which they aimed was eternal life, but that life could be received only through him to whom the Scriptures bore witness.”¹⁸

Leon Morris agrees: “Rightly read, the Old Testament leads to Christ. But the scribes of his day, with their wooden reverence for the letter of the Scripture, failed to understand the wonderful thing it was saying and thus were quite unable to recognize him to whom the Scriptures pointed.”¹⁹

Consider next a passage from Luke’s Gospel. After the death of Jesus, the disciples were thoroughly downcast, and all talk of the resurrection seemed to them like idle chatter (Luk 24:11). On the very day of Jesus’ resurrection, two disciples were traveling out to Emmaus, speaking of the recent events, when he drew alongside them. Jesus gently quizzed these men about their sad faces and intense conversation, and one disciple, Cleopas, asked the risen Lord of heaven and earth one of the most notably and unintentionally ironic questions in all of Scripture: “Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days?” (v. 18). One can only imagine the look on Christ’s face as he graciously asked, “What things?”

The disciples explained to him that they were hoping that it was the mighty prophet Jesus of Nazareth who was going to redeem Israel. Jesus had died, reports had come through of his resurrection, and the tomb had been searched and found empty; but of Jesus, there was no trace.

Our Lord gently rebukes these men and sets out to instruct them concerning what had happened in Jerusalem over the past few days: “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luk 24:25-27).

What a sermon this must have been! Of all those conversations upon which we might wish to eavesdrop, surely there are few Christians—fewer preachers—who would not wish to have been a fourth man on the road to Emmaus. Can you imagine

¹⁷ **slight hermeneutical defect** – insignificant flaw in interpreting the Bible.

¹⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 136.

¹⁹ Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), 200.

how our Lord must have taken these men to those wonderful passages, which—by means of types and shadows, prophecies and predictions—all pointed to him?

He might have begun with Genesis 3:15 and that wonderful promise set forth in what is often called the *protoevangel*,²⁰ that glorious diamond shining in the filth of the curse on the serpent, that there should be a Seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent, though in the act he would also feel the strike of the dragon against his heel.

Did he then show them that the Christ was the promised seed of Abraham in whom all the families of the earth should be blessed? Or tell the tale of Abraham offering up Isaac, his son, his only son, tracing all the Godlike and Christlike patterns of the action? Did he explain Jacob's expectation of the scepter not departing from Judah until Shiloh comes? What echoes of the messianic character and calling did he find in Joseph the Preserver and Moses the Deliverer, the great prophet of his people? How did he explain the profound significance of the Passover lamb? What meaning did he find in the great wealth of the Levitical sacrifices and rituals? What would he say about the fiery serpent raised up, that those who looked to it should not die but live? What significance did he find in Balaam's prophecy that a star should come out of Jacob and a scepter should rise out of Israel, one who would destroy his enemies and have dominion? What foreshadowings would he see in the judges and deliverers of Israel? What glimmerings of light did he reveal in God's gracious dealings with David? What did he see in the constantly dashed expectations of God's people as they looked to David's line in anticipation of one who would rule forever, time after time confessing, "he is not the one," and the growing sense of the prophets that they were looking for something far more glorious than had been expected? What wonders of divine faithfulness did he demonstrate in the covenant care of the people of God and the bloodline of David? Was persevering Job wonderfully vindicated in his faithful expectation that his eyes would see God? What wealth of instruction would Christ have drawn from the songs of Israel, finding constant testimonies of his person and work? With what piercing insight would he have spoken of Isaiah's Suffering Servant or Daniel's Son of Man? In what rich strains did faithful Jeremiah and exiled Ezekiel figure in his discourse? Did the Minor Prophets begin to sound their major chords as he unpacked the glories of his name as they had set him forth? Did Hosea's pains and comforts come alive as he explained them? Did the stern warnings of the bold prophets suddenly make sense in the eternal scheme? What did Jonah's experience yield to his teaching? Did Bethlehem Ephrathah gain a luster that Micah had never given it before? Did Habakkuk's faith gleam brighter than ever before? Did Zechariah's cleansing fountain seem to flow sweeter, and did the Pierced one appear more excellent than he had until then? Did Malachi's ardent anticipations open up and yield abundant fruit at his holy touch? What wonders the Law and the Prophets must have revealed as Jesus spoke!

Whatever passages formed the substance of his discourse, we see that our Lord set forth himself. Jesus preached Jesus: "Beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luk 24:27).

If we are going to preach Christ, then we must do what Christ himself did. To preach Christ is to open up the whole of Scripture and show how it all points to and connects with our Savior. Our Lord reiterated this when he said "These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me" (Luk 24:44).

Jesus shows us that the whole of the Word of God testifies that he is the Son of God, the promised Christ, the glorious Redeemer. Jesus says that he is the great end and ultimate fulfillment of all that the Old Testament writers were expressing. He is the focal point and central theme of Holy Scripture. As our model for ministry, Jesus shows us that the essence of preaching is the preaching of his own person, and the apostles followed in his footsteps.

They were true disciples, approaching their work no differently from their Lord. They were content to be like their Lord, following the same path without deviation. They preached Jesus of Nazareth from the whole Bible as God's Messiah. They preached him in the fullness of his person and work: Jesus as Christ, promised, living, dying, rising, and reigning was their theme and song (1Co 15:1-4).

We see it in all the records of apostolic ministry. From the moment of Paul's conversion, we find him in the synagogues, preaching the Christ, that he is the Son of God (Act 9:20), and persuading men that Jesus was that very Christ (v. 22). In Pisidian Antioch, he traces God's dealings with his people, narrowing in on David and coming swiftly to Jesus: "Of this man's seed hath God according to his promise raised unto Israel a Saviour, Jesus" (Act 13:23). Thereafter the whole sermon is all about him, closing with the great declaration and challenge:

Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses. Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets; behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you. (Act 13:38-41)

We find him in the Thessalonian synagogue, where he "reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ"

²⁰ **protoevangel** – first Gospel.

(Act 17:2-3). There he is before Agrippa: “Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles” (Act 26:22-23). We watch him in prison, speaking with the Jews “to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening” (Act 28:23) and declaring Christ also to the Gentiles: “And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him” (Act 28:30-31).

The opening words of the letter to the Romans set the tone for all his epistles: “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the Gospel of God, (which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures) concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:1-4).

We find nothing different in any of the other biblical records of apostolic preaching. We hear the same message from the mouth of Peter on the day of Pentecost, as he speaks of “Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know,” sweeping through the testimony of Scripture before rising to the piercing keynote of his address: “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Act 2:22, 36).

We hear it in Solomon’s porch:

But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled. Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began. For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people. Yea, and all the prophets from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken, have likewise foretold of these days. Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities (Act 3:18-26).

The same note is sounded repeatedly: “To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission²¹ of sins” (Act 10:43). In similar fashion, the whole body of the New Testament plays out.

These examples—and they could be multiplied many times—show us that preaching Christ’s person and work as set forth in the entire Bible was the heart of all that constituted apostolic preaching. Such preaching is nothing novel. Jesus and his apostles have set the standard from the beginning, and the best of those who follow are those who have adhered most closely to this model. Joel Beeke reminds us of this fact:

The experimental preaching of the Reformers and Puritans focused on preaching Christ. As Scripture clearly shows, evangelism must bear witness to the record God has given of his only begotten Son (Act 2:3; 5:42; 8:35; Rom 16:25; 1Co 2:2; Gal 3:1). The Puritans thus taught that any preaching in which Christ does not have the pre-eminence is not valid experiential preaching. William Perkins said that the heart of all preaching was to “preach [only] one Christ by Christ to the praise of Christ.” According to Thomas Adams, “Christ is the sum of the whole Bible, prophesied, typified,²² prefigured,²³ exhibited, demonstrated, to be found in every leaf, almost in every line, the Scriptures being but as it were the swaddling bands of the child Jesus.” “Think of Christ as the very substance, marrow, soul, and scope of the whole Scriptures”, advised Isaac Ambrose. In this Christ-centered context, Reformed and Puritan evangelism was marked by a discriminating application of truth to experience.²⁴

The great evangelical Anglican, Bishop J. C. Ryle, concurs: “Let it be a settled principle in our minds, in reading the Bible, that Christ is the central sun of the whole book. So long as we keep him in view, we shall never greatly err in our search for spiritual knowledge. Once losing sight of Christ, we shall find the whole Bible dark and full of difficulty. The key of Bible knowledge is Jesus Christ.”²⁵

For us to preach Christ means that our preaching is always to be anchored on the rock of Jesus’ person and work as set forth in the entirety of Scripture. The entire Bible points to him. He is to be the grand theme of our ministry. We must preach the Bible Christologically and Christocentrically.

²¹ **remission** – forgiveness.

²² **typified** – represented by a symbol.

²³ **prefigured** – represented beforehand by an image or representation.

²⁴ Grace Online Library, “What Is Reformed Experimental Preaching?” Joel R. Beeke, <http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org/articles/full.asp?id=42|42|394>, accessed 14 May 09.

²⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke 11–24* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 501.

True ministers of God are to preach Christ and his Gospel—that good news about our Lord who is fully divine and fully human, a sinless person who perfectly kept God’s Law for his people and who has borne his Father’s righteous judgment in their place. The Gospel is all about that person. The *what* of the good news depends upon the *who*: it concerns Jesus Christ the Son of God who came into the world to save sinners (1Ti 1:15).

What does it not mean to preach Christ?

Are we to conclude at this point that we are to preach nothing but “Calvary sermons” and that all other preaching is illegitimate? Are all of our sermons to sound the same? Are we constantly to sound the same note with the same tone and at the same pitch and volume?

Of course not! The same apostle who made it his business to know nothing but Christ and him crucified (1Co 2:2) could also say that he had, in the course of his time in Ephesus, declared the whole counsel of God (Act 20:27).

Preaching Christ: Not omitting other great themes

Preaching Christ does not at all preclude us from preaching other great themes found in the Bible such as the doctrines of justification, sanctification, glorification, and providence. All of these topics are to be heralded from the pulpit on a regular basis. However, if we are to be true to the examples of Jesus and the Apostles, we must always preach them in the light of Christ and find the road that brings us back to our Savior. Whatever text or topic is the focus of our preaching at a given time, we display it so that Christ is seen, tracing it back to our glorious Lord and Master. Preaching Christ is not merely tacking him on as an addendum to our messages or as part of a random Gospel appeal; he is not just a name to be repeated time after time. Rather, we are to see all the truths that we expound as connected to Jesus. Alexander Maclaren stated this well:

A ministry of which the Christ who lived and died for us is manifestly the center, to which all converges and from which all is viewed, may sweep a wide circumference, and include many themes. The requirement bars out no province of thought or experience, nor does it condemn the preacher to a parrot-like repetition of elementary truths, or a narrow round of commonplace. It does demand that all themes shall lead up to Christ, and all teaching point to him...Preaching Christ does not exclude any theme, but prescribes the bearing and purpose of all; and the widest compass and richest variety are not only possible, but obligatory for him who would in any worthy sense take this for the motto of his ministry, “I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1Co 2:2).²⁶

It is no agony to find Christ in the Bible and to bring him into our preaching and pastoring. One of the old masters of pastoral theology, William Taylor, exhorts us accordingly:

The Gospel, as Paul preached it, was far-reaching enough in its application to touch at every point the conduct and experiences of men. The cross, as he used it, was an instrument of the widest range and of the greatest power. When, therefore, I insist that you like him should “preach Jesus Christ and him crucified,” I do not mean to make the pulpit for you a battery, of such a nature that the guns upon it can strike only such vessels as happen to pass immediately in front of its embrasures.²⁷ On the contrary, I turn it for you into a tower, whereon is mounted a swivel-cannon, which can sweep the whole horizon of human life, and strike down all immorality, and ungodliness, and selfishness, and sin. I do not shut you into a small chamber having but one outlook, and even that into a narrow court; but I place you in an observatory with a revolving telescope that can command the landscape round and round, and sweep, besides, the hemisphere of the stars. I do not mean that you should keep continually repeating the words of “the faithful saying” like a parrot-cry, until every particle of meaning has dropped out of them; but rather, that you should make application of the great principles that lie beneath the cross, to the ever-varying circumstances and occurrences of life, and that in such a way as at once to succor²⁸ the Christian and arrest and convert the sinner.²⁹

Taylor has grasped what is evident in the apostolic writing. Search the Scriptures, and see how these men of God, time and time again, brought every issue of doctrine and practice, every question of faith and life, back to Christ and him crucified, and resolved it at the foot of the cross. Did Paul find divisions in the church? Between races? Between factions? Between individuals? Was there creeping legalism? Were libertinism³⁰ and antinomianism³¹ insinuating themselves? Were there false teachers preaching any of a range of heresies? Were there sad and doubting Christians? Believers needing comfort or exhortation? The right response to any of these dangers and difficulties was and always is Jesus. He is not only the entrance into the kingdom, he is its abiding life principle. There is nothing in the Christian life that is divorced from him. He is the golden hub of the Gospel wheel, and the whole is only true and balanced insofar as he is kept at its center.

²⁶ *The Expositor’s Bible*, 6 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 6:224.

²⁷ **embrasures** – openings in battlements.

²⁸ **succor** – help.

²⁹ *The Ministry of the Word* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2003), 102–03. This entire chapter on “The Theme and Range of the Pulpit” would bear close reading in this regard.

³⁰ **libertinism** – disregard of authority or moral principles, especially in sexual or religious matters.

³¹ **antinomianism** – the belief that Christians are not obligated to observe God’s moral law.

When we get this right, it keeps us from losing our way in the preaching and teaching of the truth as it is in Jesus. Sometimes preachers, even with the best intentions, fall into a habit of mere moralizing in their sermons. Often Old Testament narratives or New Testament episodes become nothing more than examples of how to live or not to live, examples of goodness or badness. Morality, duty, and example are on the pages of our Bibles, but there is more than these things; and such things must always be located where they belong, in their right relation to Christ. Such sermons should take us to Calvary and not to Sinai. What can be sometimes lacking is the legitimate movement from, for example, great David to great David's greater Son. The rich tapestry of divine grace pointing to and prefiguring Christ in countless ways can too easily become a one-dimensional manual for a morality that cannot be pursued apart from the Lord Christ. We must not forget that these are the pages from which Christ preached *himself*.

Preaching Christ: Not omitting the demands of holiness

Others boast of finding Jesus in all the Scriptures but fail to enforce the demands of holiness that the Scriptures issue to every child of God. Some are so busy tracing out these things that they lose sight of the fact that God intends that we be conformed to the image of his Son, a perfection of holiness: Jesus of Nazareth is what it looks like when the holiness of God completely characterizes a man, for in Jesus the holy God has become a man.

We must recognize that it is easy to issue legitimate Bible demands to God's people without rooting them in the realities of God's saving work in his incarnate Son, Jesus, and the Spirit of the Lord indwelling the heart of all God's redeemed children. It is also easy to hold Christ before men without ever pressing him into their consciences, to present him as Savior and to bypass him as Lord not in theory, but in the practice of the individual lives of his saved people.

The Lord Jesus is the motive and means to all true morality. The morality of the true saint is called holiness, and it has its starting point at the cross of Calvary. We must always begin there, delight to be there, and often return there, at the same time remembering that it is the cross that is taken up in walking the road of the true disciple who should be becoming more like his Savior day by day. Mere moralizing from the pulpit, the commendation of the shell of holiness as an end in itself, apart from the life that is in Jesus Christ, is a fool's errand, both for the man who promotes it and the one who desires it.

Preaching Christ: Not our own opinions

Furthermore, the preaching of Christ keeps us from the preaching of our own opinions. It means that not only do we not parade ourselves, but we do not promote our own ideas when we step into the pulpit or, for that matter, into the parlor or any other place. It is too easy to find sermons peppered with "I think" and "I feel." Let us be frank: who cares what a mere man thinks or feels when his business is to make known what God himself has revealed to be true? There is a place for wise counsels prayerfully grounded in the truth, for suggesting that while we cannot speak with the certainty of a truth plainly revealed, we think we also have the Spirit of God (cf. 1Co 7:40). But the pulpit is not the place for a man called to be an ambassador of the living Lord of glory to weave his own flawed speculations into God's perfect revelations, to taint the pure streams of God's truth with the oozing of his own fallen mind. The pulpit provides a too ready platform for the man with a psychological need to make his own opinions known to as many people as he can and provides some shred of that authority that such mistaken, sometimes pathetic, spirits crave for themselves. But it is not the place for anything other than holding up the Lord Jesus as the beginning and pattern of all true life, just as God has made him known.

Charles Spurgeon never lost his focus upon the Lord Jesus. Early on in his labors, he told this story:

A young man had been preaching in the presence of a venerable divine, and after he had done, he went to the old minister, and said, "What do you think of my sermon?" "A very poor sermon indeed," said he. "A poor sermon?" said the young man, "it took me a long time to study it." "Ay, no doubt of it." "Why, did you not think my explanation of the text a very good one?" "Oh, yes," said the old preacher, "very good indeed." "Well, then, why do you say it is a poor sermon? Didn't you think the metaphors were appropriate and the arguments conclusive?" "Yes, they were very good as far as that goes, but still it was a very poor sermon." "Will you tell me why you think it a poor sermon?" "Because," said he, "there was no Christ in it." "Well," said the young man, "Christ was not in the text; we are not to be preaching Christ always, we must preach what is in the text." So the old man said, "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 is a savor of Christ in it."³²

To the end, Spurgeon followed the road to Christ. In the last message he preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, delivered on the morning of the Lord's Day, June 7, 1891, the steadfast preacher said,

³² "Christ Precious to Believers" in *The New Park Street Pulpit*, 63 vols. (1860; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 5:140. Also told, in slightly different form in *The Soul Winner* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 106–107.

If you wear the livery³³ of Christ, you will find him so meek and lowly of heart that you will find rest unto your souls. He is the most magnanimous of captains. There never was his like among the choicest of princes. He is always to be found in the thickest part of the battle. When the wind blows cold, he always takes the bleak side of the hill. The heaviest end of the cross lies ever on his shoulders. If he bids us carry a burden, he carries it also. If there is anything that is gracious, generous, kind, and tender, yea lavish and superabundant in love, you always find it in him. His service is life, peace, and joy. Oh, that you would enter on it at once! God help you to enlist under the banner of Jesus Christ!³⁴

From the beginning until the end of his ministry, Spurgeon held to his proposed “subject of the ministry in this house, as long as this platform shall stand, and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshippers”—Jesus Christ. By God’s unfailing grace, Spurgeon had a Christ-centered ministry, and God richly blessed him and those who were under his ministry because of it.

Admonition and Instruction

We will be further helped in this matter of preaching Christ if we look more closely at the two currents that run in this great stream of truth: Paul speaks of Christ, “whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom” (Col 1:28). As noted before, these are the means that Paul employed, under God, to bring his proclamation of Christ close to the hearts of men.

The sense of “warning” is more definite than we might immediately understand it. A more accurate word might be *admonishing*, but we still need to lay hold of the right idea, which is of having something put into the mind or laid to the heart. One writer has described this action as “putting sense into someone’s head.” This word has to do with counseling a straying person—whether a believer or not—about correct belief or behavior. It has to do with setting the disposition of someone in proper order with a view to helping that person. This is activity designed to drive deep into the will and the affections, to hang something prominently before the eye of the mind. It will include warning, rebuke, exhortation, and comfort in order to correct, rouse, or cheer the soul.

The intensity of this word is apparent in Acts 20:31, where Paul—on the back of a series of plainly expressed concerns of the highest order—calls upon the Ephesian elders to watch, remembering that for three years he did not cease to warn [admonish] everyone night and day with tears. A slightly different nuance is apparent in 1 Corinthians 4:14, where Paul describes Apollos and himself as servants of Jesus, saying with earnest paternal³⁵ tones, “I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you.”

The intention is to awaken a man, to arouse the soul, to stimulate reflection and promote repentance. Sin will be identified and addressed, error exposed and warned against, holiness portrayed and encouraged, behavior that reflects underlying attitudes promoted where right and corrected where wrong. It is pastoral care that looks into a man’s eyes and brings the issues of sin and holiness to bear, ensuring that they penetrate, are recognized, and then acted upon. It will bring eternity near, be always conscious of the great and terrible day of the Lord, and the judgment that all must face. It brings Christ Jesus before the eye in all his splendor, emphasizes the necessity of faith in him, and holds him in the mind.

In the same way, the minister gives himself to “teaching.” This is instruction or training, whether in a formal or informal setting. It means to explain or expound something to another person and is typically connected to the work of teaching the objective truths of God’s Word. Here the preacher works upon the understanding. Christ is proclaimed by means of careful and systematic instruction, definite truth and clear direction issued and imparted to the inquiring mind, demonstrating a pastor’s ability to teach (1Ti 3:2). If the minister as admonisher is salt, pungent³⁶ and penetrating, as instructor he is light, searching and illuminating. The truth of Christ is clearly, plainly, warmly laid out. All the fullness of his person and work, everything the prophets declared him to be, all that God the Father reveals him to be, is made known with all the distinctness that a preacher can muster.

These means are to be used “in all wisdom.” Paul identifies the manner of warning and teaching Christ. In writing to the Colossians, the apostle is much concerned with wisdom, referring to it several times (1:9; 2:3; 2:23; 3:16; 4:5). The commandments and doctrines of the false teachers “have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body: not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh” (2:23). But when Paul speaks about preaching “in all wisdom” the Christ who is himself the totality of wisdom (2:3), he is subtly assaulting and opposing the counterfeit wisdom of men. Paul did not warn and teach every man according to his native human wisdom or rationality. Rather, he did these things in the wisdom that God the Holy Spirit gave him (1Co 2:13). This is spiritual wisdom that is from God and is found in his Word.

³³ **livery** – the distinctive dress or uniform of a servant; the badge of a great man’s household.

³⁴ “The Statute of David for the Sharing of the Spoil” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (1892; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970), 37:324.

³⁵ **paternal** – fatherly.

³⁶ **pungent** – strongly affecting the mind.

Thus equipped, the minister is to work at appropriate seasons and use effective means. He must discern particular needs and the corresponding Gospel counsels that are required. He is to be engaging, interesting, accessible, earnest, and colorful, as a means of performing his work to God's glory in Christ. He must root men out of every refuge of falsehood and lies in order to bring them to the knowledge of the truth. By these means, he guides sinners to Jesus and directs the child of God in matters of faith and life, keeping Christ always at the center of the wheel.

To Fellow Christians

Fellow Christian: Are you sitting under a Christ-centered, Christ-saturated, Christ-magnifying ministry? Are you hearing about him in the fullness of his person: the God-man, who is Prophet to teach us, Priest to atone and intercede for us, and King to rule over us as his people? Are you hearing about his work? Is his life of sinless obedience held up to you? Do you learn of his atoning death, bearing God's wrath in our place? Do you hear of his resurrection from the dead? What of his glorious rule as he reigns over heaven and earth? A faithful minister will bring these things often before you, directly and indirectly. You are, because of God's grace, entitled to such a ministry and entitled to require it of the man who ministers to you. The Lord intends that his people should be shepherded by men concerned for the salvation and subsequent spiritual maturity of those who hear them. He will hold to account those who neglect this calling and thereby end up with blood on their hands. God has appointed his Gospel ministers to employ proclamation, with admonition and instruction, for his glory and your good, pressing Christ home upon your minds and hearts honestly, earnestly, and closely. We should pray for regiments of such men to be raised up and thrust out into the harvest.

The ministry of a faithful man will have the savor of Christ about it. The Lord Jesus will be set forth, explicitly and implicitly, as the one who came to save his people from their sins (Mat 1:21), as the one from whom we receive all of our life as the children of God (Joh 15:4-5), as the one who promises to keep us—and will keep us—in his ways all of our days until the very end (Joh 10:27-28). This is the Christ that you need to hear about in the church that you attend. This is the one whose voice you are to hear and in whose steps you are to follow as you hear him proclaimed in the Scriptures from the man or men preaching before you week in and week out.

Settle for nothing less! The eternal well-being of your soul is at stake. Christ must be all in all. Are you, perhaps, looking for a pastor and preacher for the church where you worship? When interviewing a man for the position, ask him directly, "What do you think about Christ?" Take heed to his answer and the spirit in which he gives it. If Jesus is this man's all in all, then at least the foundation is laid for him to be a good undershepherd for the congregation; if not, then peek beneath the fleece to make sure that you are not inviting a wolf to take care of the flock.

Listen to a man's preaching. Does he belt out only the commands and demands of Scripture and leave you battered and broken by them? Or does he also, in Christ, bind up that which is broken, connecting legitimate duties and requirements to our Lord Jesus, showing how, with and in him we can carry these things out (Col 2:6-7)? Does a candidate, when he proclaims publicly and preaches privately, constantly point you back to Jesus as the one who can meet all your spiritual needs, the one from whom you are to derive comfort? Does he bring the light of instruction to bear on your soul and rub the salt of admonition into your heart?

This is something of what it means to preach Christ in the fullness of his being. It is the model for all Gospel witness. You yourself have opportunities to declare Christ to others. This responsibility in its broadest sense is not the task only of ordained men. When the Lord gives you a door for the Word, whether at the workplace, the library, the store, at your child's bedside, or in the pew after the sermon, have you told others about him? This was the pattern in the early church, even in the midst of fierce persecution and principled opposition: "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word" (Act 8:4). Remember in this regard that there is also a duty to one another within the congregation in terms of instruction and warning. Writing to the maturing saints in Rome, Paul said, "And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another" (Rom 15:14). The church in Colosse is encouraged to carry out this duty in their sung worship: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col 3:16). The church in Thessalonica, fighting a different battle, is encouraged to admonish the one who does not obey apostolic directives: "Note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (2Th 3:14-15).

But remember also that such a ministry to you—whether from a faithful pastor or fellow member—will never lead to an easy time or a casual life. If a man is faithful to your soul, you will not hear stories and jokes all the time. You will not always feel good about yourself. At times, you may see yourself as the least worthy sinner who ever crawled the earth. You may often weep over sin. You will not only hear about your privileges and blessings but will have responsibilities and obligations pressed upon your soul. You will be humbled as well as lifted up; you will often mourn before you rejoice. You will be called to walk in the footsteps of the crucified Jesus as a faithful disciple and be brought back into the way when you stray from it.

The "downside" of praying for and finding such a ministry is that you ought to receive it. Every Christian likes the idea of holiness and applauds the notion of a faithful ministry, but we are not always so keen when we feel its Scriptural force. We are ready, perhaps even eager, to see others admonished and instructed, but there will almost certainly come a day when a

loving, faithful servant of Jesus will look us in the eye and put something in our mind, will impart truth to us and will not let us shake it off, but will press it home until it penetrates, hold it up until it illuminates. Then what a multitude of excuses we make, what a list of reasons we offer to ignore the truth, how many evasions and self-delusions we will conjure to avoid the truth and its demands.

When you pray that you might enjoy the privileges of a faithful Gospel ministry, pray also that you will be disposed to receive it. Pray for its fruitful effect upon you and for the pulling down of all barriers to faithful warning and teaching, seeking that the Word of the Lord may run freely and be glorified (2Th 3:1). It is a disaster to lack such a ministry; it is a terror to reject it; it is an unparalleled blessing to receive it and embrace it.

To Fellow Pastors

Fellow Pastor: We must be fundamentally and profoundly Christ-centered. We are to see and put Christ in all his glory at the very heart of our ministry, bringing him to bear, as Paul and the other apostles do, upon situations great and small. We are, by these God-appointed means, to labor for the salvation and spiritual maturity of all those before us. Our duty is to make Christ known, publicly to proclaim him, impressing him upon the lives of men and women, boys and girls, closely, effectually, earnestly, and prayerfully, by the pointed tools of admonition and instruction. This is how we in our turn fulfill the Word of God (Col 1:25). Nothing is to dissuade us; nothing is to deter us; nothing should bring us to despair. As we will see in coming chapters, there is a glorious end in view though a great deal of hardship involved, and we must therefore pursue this calling ardently and faithfully.

What hinders us, then, from preaching Christ more fully and more freely in our ministries? Surely we love him, do we not? Do we not esteem him as precious above all things? If this is so, how is it that we do not preach him as we should? Is there some reason he has not been the subject of our ministries in recent days, or even months, or perhaps years? Could it be our pride that hinders us, our desire to share the glory that Christ will not share with another? Could it be our self-centeredness that holds us back, that we want to spare ourselves the effort of preparing to preach like this and of pastoring in the aftermath of such sermons? Could it be fear, fear of outcomes, fear of the response of the people, or fear of our own insufficiency to address such a high theme—an implicit uncertainty in the Spirit's ability to make us sufficient?

Here we must take stock. Can you say with the apostle, "him we preach"? Is your ministry centered on Jesus, his glorious person and his finished work, as you declare him from all the Scriptures as the only Savior of sinners? Does he have the preeminence in all things in your ministry (Col 1:18), both in principle and in practice? The outstanding Baptist theologian of the eighteenth century, Andrew Fuller, assures the fearful preacher that he may rest here:

If you preach Christ, you need not fear for want of matter. His person and work are rich in fullness. Every divine attribute is seen in him. All the types prefigure him. The prophecies point to him. Every truth bears relation to him. The law itself must be so explained and enforced as to lead to him...The preaching of Christ will answer every end of preaching. This is the doctrine which God owns to conversion, to the leading of awakened sinners to peace, and to the comfort of true Christians. If the doctrine of the cross be no comfort to us, it is a sign we have no right to comfort. This doctrine is calculated to quicken the indolent, to draw forth every Christian grace, and to recover the backslider. This is the universal remedy for all the moral diseases of all mankind.³⁷

To proclaim Christ Jesus our Lord is to preach him by whom the kingdom advances, in whom is the power of God to salvation, through whom comes life and peace and blessing to the church. He alone answers every need of the church in every time and place. He is the Savior whom we are to present to our people, crying with the Apostle John, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Preaching duty alone is not preaching Christ; preaching the law alone is not preaching Christ; preaching a principle alone is not preaching Christ; we must preach Christ himself.

Furthermore, we must preach Christ in a Christlike manner. We must pray God to grant us a Christlike spirit of meekness and boldness, of loving firmness and principled tenderness. A duty to proclaim and a responsibility to admonish and instruct must never become an excuse to lash out unrestrainedly or to brutalize the people of God. We need the wisdom that is from above (Jam 1:5; 3:17-18) for the discharge of our duty and the employment of our ministerial tools. We need the grace that God supplies to keep us from growing weary in this well doing, to maintain honesty and integrity, to keep our eye fixed on the purpose of this sometimes painful labor.

If you preach in this way, you may see sinners bored, frustrated, irritated, and angered, but you must esteem Christ too highly and their souls too precious to hold back that which, under God, will also prove the means of their being humbled, convicted, and converted. You may see even the saints appear to be shaken, troubled, rebuked, ashamed, rebellious, resistant, and proud as Jesus is declared: sins will be uncovered, duty instilled, holiness displayed, and grace upheld as the cross is pressed into the saints' lives so as to leave an indelible imprint. Remaining sin in God's people will kick hard against "Christ crucified" applied to their whole lives, but he is to have the preeminence in all things, and we love the people of God too much to allow them to go on in ignorance and sin. Preach Christ to Christ's people: they need him desperately, and he will do them good.

³⁷ Andrew Fuller, "Preaching Christ" in *Complete Works*, 3 vols. (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 1:503-504. See also "The Uniform Bearing of the Scriptures on the Person and Work of Christ" (1:702-704) for some reasonable and balanced advice.

Consider again that plaque that sits on many pulpits. Remember its inscription: “Sir, we would see Jesus” (Joh 12:21). Make it so. Make it your goal to hold him up in all his splendor and worthiness in all you do as a preacher and pastor.

How shall we accomplish this? To begin with, we need simply to spend more time with him. The Christian’s love for the unseen Christ grows by communion with him. He is a person, a real person, a living Lord and Savior, who has promised to be with us all of our days. We must spend time with him daily, and as we do, we will be overwhelmed with his greatness and glory to the end that we will want to tell others about him.

This is not only a matter of the time that we put into our sermon preparation for the Lord’s Day or other ministerial duties. We must not read the Bible for our “professional” needs, as a lawyer might turn to his statute books. Hear Andrew Fuller once more in his counsel to a young minister at his ordination:

Live the life of a Christian, as well as of a minister. Read as one, preach as one, converse as one—to *be profited*, as well as to profit others. One of the greatest temptations of a ministerial life is to handle divine truth as ministers, rather than as Christians—for others, rather than for ourselves. But the word will not profit them that *preach* it, any more than it will them that hear it, unless it be “mixed with faith.” If we study the Scriptures as Christians, the more familiar we are with them, the more we shall feel their importance; but if our object be only to find out something to say to others, our familiarity with them will prove a snare. It will resemble that of soldiers, and doctors, and undertakers with death; the more familiar we are with them, the less we shall feel their importance.³⁸

Let us not handle the Scriptures in our studies as mere scholars, but receive them as humble saints. Let our efforts not be only for others, but let us preach Christ first to ourselves. We need to have constant and fresh dealings with our Lord if we are going to preach him to others with fervor.

How will we do this? We must read the Word of God with a Christian appetite, as a fiancée reads the love letters of her groom-to-be, poring over the pages, reading and re-reading the love-laden phrases. We must meditate on the truth as it is in Jesus; we must memorize and chew over the Scriptures. We must be much in prayer, conversing with the Author of the book, and seeking the Spirit’s illumination that more and more we might be given eyes to see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2Co 4:6). Only then will we be able to preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves the servants of God’s people for Jesus’ sake (2Co 4:5).

If we are to preach our Lord to others, we must have an ever increasing heart attachment to him. God has called us into the fellowship of his Son (1Co 1:9; 1Jo 1:3). We are called to grow in the grace and knowledge of him (2Pe 3:18). We are to be “changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2Co 3:18). As this glorious process takes place, our preaching of Christ will not be like the flow of water resulting from the mechanical pressures of an artificial fountain, perhaps correct and even, but emotionless and routine. Rather, it will be the bubbling natural spring of a soul taken up with Jesus, the spontaneous outflow and overflow of a heart enraptured by Christ.

It is Christ alone whom we are to preach and Christ only who can enable us, by his Spirit, to preach in this way. Do you feel the weight of this duty? Good! Then we are ready to fall on our faces and plead with God to equip us in mind and heart and soul and strength to serve his glory by exalting his Son, Jesus Christ. The hymn writer John Berridge expressed such desires in potent words. Let us pray them home:

*The means of grace are in my hand, The blessing is at God’s command,
Who must the work fulfil; And though I read, and watch and pray,
Yet here the Lord directs my way, And worketh all things still.*

*I cannot speak a proper word, Nor think aright, but from the Lord
Preparing heart and tongue; In nature I can see no good,
But all my good proceeds from God, And does to grace belong.*

*I see it now, and do confess, My utter need of Jesus’ grace,
And of his Spirit’s light; I beg his kind and daily care;
O Lord, my heart and tongue prepare To think and speak aright.*

*Prepare my heart to love Thee well, And love Thy truth which doth excel,
And love Thy children dear; Instruct me how to live by faith,
And feel the virtue of Thy death, And find Thy presence near.*

*Prepare my tongue to pray and praise, To speak of providential ways,
And heavenly truth unfold; To strengthen well a feeble soul,
Correct the wanton, rouse the dull, And silence sinners bold. ❧*

³⁸ “Spiritual Knowledge and Love Necessary for the Ministry,” *Complete Works*, 1:482, original emphasis. He gives similar counsel repeatedly to preachers in a series of sermons and addresses directed to men entering or already in the Gospel ministry.

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