

Christ Crucified: The Necessity of Preaching Christ from All of Scripture

Jared Bumpers

Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Abstract: *Must every sermon contain the gospel? This question has frustrated homileticians for the last several decades. While some homileticians argue preachers have a responsibility to preach Christ in every sermon, others argue preachers have a responsibility to preach the text (although they would affirm the importance of preaching Christ often). This article argues Christian preachers should preach Christ in every sermon and provides three reasons to substantiate this claim. First, the pattern of preaching in the New Testament was undeniably Christ-centered. Jesus, the apostles, and Paul embraced and practiced gospel-centered preaching. Second, Christ-centered preaching benefits the church. When Christ is preached, unbelievers are certain to hear the gospel and struggling Christians are comforted. Third, failing to preach Christ every week negatively affects the church. Christ-less preaching robs unbelievers of the opportunity to believe the gospel and withholds the true source of change from believers.*

Key Words: *Christ, Christ-centered, gospel-Centered, homiletics, pastoral theology, practical theology, preaching, redemptive-historical.*

Christian preachers have a responsibility to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ from all of Scripture. Jesus himself claimed the entirety of Scripture bears witness to him (John 5:39; cf. Luke 24:44–49), and Christian preaching should reflect that reality. Indeed, preaching the gospel is what makes Christian preaching distinctly “Christian.”¹ While most preachers would affirm general statements concerning the importance of preaching Christ, many would bristle at the notion Christ must be at the heart of every sermon. “Must every sermon contain the

gospel,” they ask. The short answer is “yes.” Preachers who fail to proclaim the gospel in every sermon ignore the teaching of the New Testament, rob their congregations of the benefits of hearing the gospel each week, and expose their congregations to the dangers of Christ-less sermons.

The Pattern of Preaching in the New Testament

The Gospel writers portray Jesus as a preacher.² He began his earthly ministry by preaching the gospel (Matt 4:17; Mark 1:14). Throughout his ministry, Jesus taught and preached (Matt 11:1; Mark 1:38–39, 2:2; Luke 4:42–44, 20:1). He also sent his apostles out to preach the gospel during his earthly ministry (Matt 10:5–15; Mark 3:13–19; Luke 9:1–6). Preaching was at the heart of the ministry of Jesus and his apostles.³ After the resurrection and prior to the ascension, Jesus commissioned his disciples to proclaim the good news of his suffering and resurrection to all nations (Luke 24:44–49), and the remainder of the New Testament bears witness to their faithfulness to preach the gospel.

Consider the sermons in Acts. Every sermon Luke recorded was gospel-centered. On Pentecost, Peter proclaimed Christ as the “crucified” (Acts 2:23), “raised” (Acts 2:24), and “exalted” Lord (Acts 2:33). At Solomon’s Portico, Peter preached Jesus, the Author of Life, whom the religious leaders “killed” but God “raised” (Acts 3:15). In the house of Cornelius, Peter pointed Cornelius and his family to Jesus, who was

² Jesus himself viewed preaching as central to his ministry. Jonathan I. Griffiths wrote, “The work of preaching is given special dignity by the fact that Jesus identified his role in his earthly ministry as primarily that of a preacher. A range of passages throughout the Synoptic Gospels highlight this priority” (*Preaching in the New Testament: An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017], 122).

³ In this article, “preaching” refers to the public proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The New Testament writers used a variety of terms to describe the task of preaching, which indicates the richness and complexity of the task of proclamation. At the same time, significant overlap exists between the various terms used to describe preaching. Every term highlights the verbal nature of preaching, and every term is paired with specific phrases to describe the Christ-centered content of preaching. For an analysis of preaching terms in Acts, see H. Jared Bumpers, “‘No Other Name’: A Biblical Theology of Preaching in Acts,” *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 21.1 (2022): 79–98. For an analysis of preaching terms in the New Testament, see Klaas Runia, “What Is Preaching According to the New Testament?” *TynBul* 29.1 (1978): 3–48.

¹ Jay Adams observed, “What makes it [Christian preaching] distinctive is the all-pervading presence of a saving and sanctifying Christ. Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach” (*Preaching with Purpose: A Comprehensive Textbook on Biblical Preaching* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 147).

put “to death by hanging ... on a tree” but was “raised” by God (Acts 10:39–40).⁴ At Antioch in Pisidia, Paul preached about Jesus, who was “executed” by the rulers in Jerusalem (Acts 13:28) but “raised ... from the dead” by God (Acts 13:30). In Athens, Paul proclaimed Jesus as the resurrected judge (Acts 17:31). Every sermon in Acts emphasized the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which indicates the centrality of the gospel in early Christian preaching.⁵

Paul’s reflections on his own preaching ministry affirm the importance of the gospel in Christian preaching in the early church. Two passages in particular provide insight into Paul’s preaching philosophy: 1 Cor 2:1–5 and Col 1:24–29. In 1 Cor 2:1–5, Paul described his ministry in Corinth. Rather than preaching with “lofty speech or wisdom,” Paul resolved “to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). His preaching was explicitly and intentionally Christ-centered. This commitment to preaching Christ exclusively was not limited to Corinth; it was a “regular pattern throughout his ministry.”⁶ In his letter to the Colossians, Paul repeated his commitment to Christ-centered preaching (Col 1:24–29). After discussing his stewardship from God to make the Word of God fully

⁴ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

⁵ The descriptions of the preaching of Phillip and Paul in Acts also highlight the centrality of Jesus in early Christian preaching. Phillip went to Samaria and “proclaimed to them the Christ” (Acts 8:5), and the people “believed Phillip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 8:12). After telling the Ethiopian eunuch the good news about Jesus, “Phillip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea” (Acts 8:40). Based on Luke’s description of his preaching, Phillip was a Christ-centered preacher.

Paul “proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues” after his conversion (Acts 9:20), “continued to preach the gospel” in Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:7), explained and proved “that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead” in the synagogue in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2–3), preached “Jesus and the resurrection” in Athens (Acts 17:18), and testified “to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus” in Corinth (Acts 18:5). After he was arrested and sent to Rome, Paul spent two years “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31). According to Luke, Paul’s preaching ministry was centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

⁶ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 114.

known, Paul summarized his preaching ministry as follows: “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). Christ was “the center and sole focus of Paul’s gospel” and was at “the center of Paul’s proclamation.”⁷ These two passages demonstrate Jesus was the content and the *telos* of preaching. Paul preached Christ (the content) with the goal of developing mature followers of Christ (*telos*).

Preaching in the New Testament was Christ-centered. From the commission of Jesus to the preaching in Acts and the ministry of Paul, the proclamation of the gospel was central. Furthermore, the Bible contains no examples of Christ-less sermons. A careful reading of the New Testament reveals the apostles and leaders of the early church consistently exalted Christ in their preaching. Contemporary preachers would be foolish to deviate from the pattern of preaching established in the New Testament. Besides, why would a Christian preacher “even want to try to preach a Christian sermon without mentioning Jesus?”⁸ Preachers follow the pattern established by Jesus and the apostles by preaching the gospel in every sermon.

The Benefits of Christ-Centered Preaching

Preaching Christ in every sermon and from every text is biblical and beneficial. The following list is not exhaustive, but it does illustrate the benefits of preaching the gospel consistently:

First, gospel-centered preaching ensures unbelievers listening to the sermon will hear the gospel. As Paul noted in Romans 10, people cannot believe the gospel unless they hear the gospel, and they will not hear the gospel unless someone preaches the gospel to them (Rom 10:14–15). Therefore, preachers have a responsibility to preach Christ so those who do not know Christ can hear the gospel. A commitment to Christ-centered preaching ensures unbelievers who attend church—whether unregener-

⁷ David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 131. G. K. Beale also noted the gospel-centered nature of Paul’s preaching ministry. He wrote, “This verb ‘announce/declare’ (*καταγγελλω*, *katangello*) refers to Paul’s preaching, as in Acts, and is used only by Paul in his writings to refer to his or others’ proclamation of the gospel.” G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 151.

⁸ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 115.

ate church members or visitors attending with a friend—will hear the gospel every time they attend.

Second, Christ-centered preaching reminds Christians of the true source of transforming grace: Jesus Christ. Christians need to be reminded of the gospel constantly, as they are prone to forget it.⁹ Luther understood this well. In his commentary on Galatians, he stated the gospel is “the principal article of all Christian doctrine, wherein the knowledge of all godliness consisteth. Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually.”¹⁰ The grace to obey biblical commands comes from Christ alone. Preachers should constantly remind their listeners of their need for God’s grace to live the Christian life by preaching the gospel in every sermon.

Third, preaching Christ in every sermon helps listeners see the big picture of God’s story of redemption. If the metanarrative of Scripture is God’s redemption of fallen humanity through the person and work of Christ, then Christians need to be taught how every passage of Scripture fits into that larger story. Gospel-centered preaching places every text in its larger redemptive-historical context and helps people see the Bible as an organic whole rather than a compilation of random stories.

Fourth, a commitment to gospel-centered preaching helps pastors avoid moralism. Julius Kim observed, “Much of what passes for Christian preaching is nothing more than moral advice or moving storytelling that leads to some form of good moral advice.”¹¹ Preaching Christ in every sermon helps preachers avoid preaching self-help sermons or “boot strap” Christianity, where Christians are called to better themselves by picking themselves up by their bootstraps and obeying biblical commands. Instead, gospel-centered preaching points them to Christ, the one who obeyed God’s commands in their place and empowers them to obey God’s commands in the present.

Fifth, Christ-centered preaching comforts Christians who are struggling. When Christians fail to obey biblical commands, they often fall into doubt and despair. The gospel reminds them of their security in Christ. Their salvation is not based on their works, but on Christ’s work. They did not earn

⁹ Most Christians are what Paul Tripp calls “gospel amnesiacs.” They forget the gospel regularly and need to be reminded. See Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 477–78.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (London: William Tegg and Co., 1850), 67.

¹¹ Julius J. Kim, *Preaching the Whole Counsel of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 63.

their salvation, and they cannot lose it. Christ holds them fast. They belong to God, and “nobody steals God’s stuff.”¹²

In short, preaching Christ in every sermon strengthens the church. As John Piper argued, “Every sermon that offers anything good to believers in Christ, or that helps believers see that God will turn for good everything bad in their lives, must be a sermon that exults in Christ crucified.”¹³ Preachers who fail to proclaim Christ from all of Scripture rob their listeners of the benefits of hearing the gospel weekly.

The Dangers of “Christ-less” Sermons

What is at stake if preachers fail to preach Christ in every sermon? The following dangers lurk in the shadows of any preaching ministry that fails to exalt Christ every week:

First, Christ-less sermons attempt to rob Christ of his glory. Preaching the Word without preaching the Word made flesh misses the mark of faithful Christian preaching. Jesus Christ is the central figure of human history. All of Scripture bears witness to Christ (John 5:39; Luke 24:25–27, 44–47). Jesus “is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might have the preeminence” (Col 1:18), and “everything” includes our preaching! When preachers fail to preach Christ weekly, they fail to honor Christ as the central figure of Scripture and the one who saves and sanctifies his people.

*Second, Christ-less sermons “subvert the gospel.”*¹⁴ Preaching devoid of the gospel eventually ends up undermining the gospel. It makes the gospel about what Christians do rather than what Christ has done. While the Bible does contain imperatives, which should be preached, the biblical authors usually place these imperatives after the indicative of the gospel.¹⁵ Thus, the indicative-imperative structure provides a helpful

¹² Jared C. Wilson, *Gospel Deep: Reveling in the Excellencies of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 50.

¹³ John Piper, *Expository Exultation: Christian Preaching as Worship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 225.

¹⁴ This phrase is borrowed from Christopher J. H. Wright (*How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016], 131).

¹⁵ For example, Paul spends the first three chapters of Ephesians discussing what Christ has done (the indicative of the gospel) before addressing the behavior of Christians (biblical imperatives). He does the same thing in Romans, where the first eleven chapters focus on doctrinal truths before turning to in-

framework for preaching biblical commands.

Preachers must avoid declaring the imperatives of Scripture apart from the indicative of the gospel. Merely preaching the imperatives “implies that the solution is that we improve our behavior on our own, which is the antithesis of the gospel.”¹⁶ Instead, preachers should proclaim the indicative of the gospel and encourage Christians to obey the imperatives of Scripture because Christ has redeemed them and empowered them to obey his commands.

Third, Christ-less sermons withhold the true source of change from believers. The gospel is instrumental in producing spiritual change in the life of Christians. Tim Keller explained, “After the gospel has regenerated us and we are converted, it is the instrument of all continual growth and spiritual progress.”¹⁷ Through the weekly proclamation of the gospel, Christians are reminded of their sinfulness, their need for grace, Christ’s provision of grace, and the transforming power of the gospel. These powerful truths are withheld from believers when the gospel is not preached each week.

Fourth, Christ-less sermons produce prideful and self-righteous Christians. If you preach biblical texts without pointing to Christ as the means by which Christians can obey, obedient Christians will become proud of their good works. They will “become self-righteous, entitled, less patient and gracious with others.”¹⁸ Christians need to be reminded their obedience is due to God’s gracious enablement and not their own strength, which should produce humility rather than pride.

Fifth, Christ-less sermons produce despairing Christians. While obedient Christians hear Christ-less sermons and become proud, struggling and disobedient Christians become distraught. After hearing a sermon filled

structions for believers in the final five chapters. For a good discussion of the relationship between the indicative and the imperative in preaching, see John Carick, *The Imperative of Preaching: A Theology of Sacred Rhetoric* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2002).

¹⁶ Allan Moseley, *From the Study to the Pulpit: An 8-Step Method for Preaching and Teaching the Old Testament* (Wooster, OH: Weaver Books, 2017), 199.

¹⁷ Tim Keller, “The Centrality of the Gospel,” Redeemer City to City, <https://redeemercitytocity.com/articles-stories/the-centrality-of-the-gospel>. Keller goes on to say Christians “never ‘get beyond the gospel’ to something more advanced. The gospel is not the first step in a stairway of truths; rather, it is more like the hub in a wheel of truth. The gospel is not just the ABC’s but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom but the way we make all progress in the kingdom.”

¹⁸ Tim Keller, *Preaching* (New York: Viking, 2015), 61.

with lots of commands and no gospel, Christians who try to obey the commands of Scripture and fail feel hopeless and defeated.

Churches and Christians do not have to suffer. The dangers listed are avoidable. The key is to preach the gospel. By proclaiming the gospel in every sermon, preachers can insulate the body of Christ from the dangers of Christ-less sermons.

Summary

Every sermon should contain the gospel of Jesus Christ. The apostles modeled Christ-centered preaching. The church benefits when Christ-centered preaching is present. The church suffers when Christ-centered preaching is absent. Indeed, Christ is the only hope of salvation for sinners and growth for Christians. May every preacher join with the apostle Paul and say, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:28).