

Name: Daniel H. Chew

Preaching to the Three-fold Image of God

After God had made all other creatures, He created man, male and female, ...
endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image... –
Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter IV, Section II

... until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of
God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ
(Eph. 4:13 –ESV)

INTRODUCTION

The movement towards Christ-centered preaching is a rather recent phenomenon, although the elements it promotes are not. From Geerhardus Vos' promotion of Biblical Theology¹ to Edmund Clowney's² and Dennis Johnson's³ promotion of preaching Christ from all of Scripture, the modern movement towards Christ-centered preaching⁴ is based upon the teaching that all of Scripture testifies of Christ (c.f. Lk. 24:27) and therefore preaching that is to remain true to the Scriptures and the Apostolic model must be centered on Christ.

In this paper, I would like to introduce a complementary motif of preaching– the three-fold image of God. First, I would briefly state the development of Christ-centered preaching and how it compares to and its claims to have overcome the weaknesses of the other preaching models. I would then look at potential problems which may arise in the Christ-centered preaching model. Using the doctrine of the image of God (*Imago Dei*), I would then suggest how it can function as

¹ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans. Reprint, Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007)

² Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2003). See also the chapter by Clowney, "Preaching Christ From All the Scriptures", in Samuel T. Logan (Editor), *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 163-91.

³ Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007)

⁴ A history of the recovery of Reformed biblical theology with Geerhardus Vos and the movement towards Christ-centered preaching is recounted in Johnson, 122-5

a supplementary motif which it is hoped would improve on the basic Christ-centered model and help overcome some of its weaknesses.

CHRIST-CENTERED PREACHING

At the beginning of the 20th century, systems of theology both Liberal and Dispensational have disrupted the unity of the Bible. The former deconstructed the text of Scripture in the name of trying “to liberate biblical exegesis from dogmatic tradition,”⁵ and through higher criticism claimed authority over deciding the contours and trustworthiness of various passages of Scripture. Even if radical higher criticism, as seen in the so-called “Jesus Seminar,” was not embraced in its totality, the unity between the Old Testament and the New Testament was broken as the so-called Old Testament God of wrath was contrasted with the New Testament Jesus of love.⁶ On the other end of the theological spectrum, Dispensationalism originated in the teachings of John Nelson Darby and Cyrus Ingersoll Scofield in their promotion of what they call the “literal sense”⁷ of Scripture, which sees and divides redemptive history into various dispensations. Regardless of which model of Dispensationalism is adopted, the idea of different dispensations whereby God has a different economy of salvation between the Old and the New “Dispensations” is definitive of Dispensationalism.⁸

In contrast to both conservative and liberal efforts to deny the unity of all of Scripture, Biblical Theology teaches the unity of all of Scripture in its redemptive-historical organic

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5

⁶ This ignores the fact that Jesus spoke a lot about hell and the terrible judgments recorded in the book of Revelation, which make the ten plagues in the Exodus plus the Canaanite conquest look peaceful in comparison. Also, the God in the Old Testament does not only judge the wicked, but He is also loving (Ex. 33:19; Deut. 7:6-9).

⁷ Johnson, 5

⁸ A useful critique of traditional Dispensationalism is the book written by John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism*, 2nd Edition (Lake Mary, Florida: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000). One could say that the *sine qua non* of Dispensationalism is the difference between Israel and the Church as being essentially two peoples of God.

development– with revelation growing and maturing as history progresses from the Old Testament era to the New Testament era.⁹ While not denying the differences between the different epochs in the history of biblical revelation, Vos states that the “truth is inherently rich and complex,”¹⁰ “carrying within itself a multiformity of aspects.”¹¹ Addressing especially the Liberals in his day, Vos has stated that those who deny the Bible’s absoluteness and infallibility through questioning its unity have a deistic and “wrong view of God’s nature and His relation to the world.”¹²

Christ-centered preaching depends on and is the method of preaching derived from Biblical Theology, which sees Scripture as a whole¹³ testifying of Christ. As Clowney succinctly states, “The whole Bible bears witness to Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ Therefore, proponents of Christ-centered preaching have found it necessary to assert the unity of the Scriptures and dispose of Liberalism and Dispensationalism in their attacks on the unity of the Word of God first and foremost, even if such is done briefly.¹⁵ Building on the basis of Biblical Theology and its teaching of the unity of all of Scripture, Christ-centered preaching is done in a manner that “take[s] account of the full drama of redemption, and its realization in Christ.”¹⁶ Christ is therefore the center of all preaching as it was the case for the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 2:2) and thus we should preach Christ from and in all of Scripture, for they testify of Him (Lk. 24:27). Using Clowney’s diagram of interpreting Scripture in a Christocentric manner,¹⁷ we are to interpret each biblical event and

⁹ Vos, 7

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 22-4 where Goldsworthy mentioned the unity of Scripture as taught in Biblical Theology as important for Christ-centered preaching.

¹⁴ Clowney, “Preaching Christ From All the Scriptures”, in Logan, 164.

¹⁵ Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*, 16-7. Goldsworthy, xii-xii, 14-6. Johnson, 4-9

¹⁶ Clowney, *Ibid.*, 11

¹⁷ Clowney, in Logan, 179. Also reproduced in Johnson, 231

fact in its own historical context first and then place it within the larger canonical or redemptive historical context to see its full meaning in Christ.

To illustrate just how Christ-centered interpretation and preaching is to be done, examples of Christ-centered exegeses, expositions and sermons from various parts and genres of Scripture were given.¹⁸ Such examples it is hoped would help interpreters and preachers of God's Word to understand and teach the Word of God in a Christocentric manner.

CHRIST-CENTERED MODEL VERSUS RIVAL PREACHING MODELS

The main rival models to the Christ-centered model of preaching are¹⁹: (1) Preaching to Convert, (2) Preaching to Edify and (3) Preaching to Instruct. As stated, the distinguishing feature of each model is their purpose around which they organize how preaching is to be done so as to accomplish their stated goal.

In the Preaching to Convert model, the goal of preaching is the salvation of the one who hears the message. Evangelism is the main and even sole purpose of preaching, and efforts are taken to make the Gospel message accessible to those outside the Church who have not believed the Gospel. Following this model, we have the Seeker-sensitive churches exemplified in Pastor Bill Hybels and the Purpose Driven churches as led by Pastor Rick Warren. Hybels has advocated for preaching to "felt needs" and of meeting the "seekers" where they are; reaching out to Unchurched Harry and Mary²⁰ in their community. Rick Warren opts for a slightly more nuanced approach and advocates preaching that appeals to men's felt need for purpose in life, which is to then to be found in and fulfilled by God,²¹ a fact which can be explicitly seen in his

¹⁸ Clowney, 59-179. Goldsworthy, 140-256. Johnson, 239-395

¹⁹ This section would be based upon Johnson's book, pages 28-54.

²⁰ Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan, 1993)

²¹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven® Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004).

sentence that “preaching to felt needs is a theological sound approach to introducing people to God.”²²

The weaknesses of this model according to Dennis Johnson are that there is a danger of the message being man-centered instead of Christ-centered, that the whole counsel of God may not be proclaimed, that parts of Scripture deemed offensive such as those relating to “sin” and “hell” may be toned down, sermons may become moralistic, through all these the Gospel message itself becomes distorted, and lastly it may not meet the nourishment and maturation needs of Christian believers.²³ In addition to all these weaknesses, James R. White has pointed out another real problem with such seeker-sensitive evangelism. As he has said, “What you win them with is what you win them to.”²⁴ Those who are won over by the meeting of their felt needs will not be won to the Gospel even if it had been rightly proclaimed and will only remain in the church in so far as their felt needs are met.

In the Preaching to Edify model, the goal of preaching is the edification of the saints. Such is done through expounding the texts and helping the congregation to see how their situation mirrors that of the original recipients, to see their “need for change through repentance and growth in sanctification,” as well as to receive guidance for such change.²⁵ Preaching in church is for building up the saints, while evangelism is to be done outside the church to unbelievers there.

The weaknesses of this model are its inclination towards moralism, and its tendency towards making the Gospel into Law and the acquisition of mere head knowledge in the views of

²² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church — Growth without Compromising your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995; Reprint, IMPrint Edition, Singapore: Campus Crusade Asia Limited, 2005), 296

²³ Johnson, 33-37

²⁴ James R. White, “We Don’t Need Reformation, We Need... Soul-Winning!” Alpha and Omega Ministry Blog, <http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/index.php?itemid=3558&catid=15> (accessed December 1, 2010)

²⁵ Johnson, 39

any unbelievers present. It may also fail to challenge hearers beyond surface behavioral areas of sanctification, and biblical texts that are more cognitive and less about life transformation may be neglected.²⁶

In the last model, Preaching to Instruct, preaching is done for the purpose of teaching believers the cognitive truths in God's Word. Whether it is for general theological instruction or preaching redemptive-historically, the aim is to instruct God's people in God's truth so that they are not conformed to the world but renewed in their minds (Rom. 12:2).

Nevertheless, Johnson cautioned against possible weaknesses in this model. In the area especially of catechetical preaching, suspicion would be generated if catechisms instead of Scripture were seen to be taken as the final authority on the issue preached.²⁷ Imbalance in spiritual growth is also a potential problem if only the mind is reached with the message. The prospect of the message being unintelligible to unbelievers, because they do not understand the theological jargon used, is an ever-present danger in this model. The related preaching model of redemptive-historical preaching on the other hand suffers from potentially missing out the particulars of the text preached on as preachers look at the macro picture of Scripture, and it is uncertain how such preaching would do justice to non-narrative genres.²⁸

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH THE CHRIST-CENTERED MODEL

The Christ-centered model supposedly avoids as much as possible the weaknesses of other models. As both believers and unbelievers need the Gospel, the same Gospel that is preached Christocentrically will both convert and edify. Since all of Scripture is about Christ, preaching

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-3

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 46

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 46-52

Christ from all of Scripture would instruct believers as well. Compared to other models, the Christ-centered model is indeed superior and more faithful to the Scriptures.

However, there are some potential practical problems with the Christ-centered model which I have discerned. They are: terminological unspecificity and a tendency towards doctrinal reductionism.

Regarding the first issue, while it is certainly true that all of Scripture is about Christ, the term “Christ-centered” itself is not a specific term, almost like a “vague shibboleth.”²⁹ Just like the term “Gospel-centered”, it is doubtful whether any Christian cult would consider itself “non-Gospel-centered” or their preaching “non-Christ-centered.” Those in the Neo-Orthodox camp would certainly consider themselves Christ-centered, in fact, more Christ-centered than the Reformed orthodox since they believe everything can be reduced to the revelation of Christ. The examples given of Christ-centered interpretations and sermons by Clowney, Goldsworthy and Johnson would certainly help narrow the range of meanings as to what “Christ-centered” actually means, yet such examples cannot exhaust the range of possible interpretations that are “Christ-centered”.

Along these lines, the term “Christ-centered” as it has originated within Reformed circles is heavily indebted to the Reformed tradition. However, as the concept of being “Christ-centered” spreads outside confessional Reformed circles to broad Evangelicalism and beyond, the term starts to lose its meaning. This can be seen to some extent in the journal article by the Lutheran Andrew Weyermann.³⁰ In his article entitled “Christ-centered preaching”, Weyermann promotes the idea of Christ-centered preaching in Lutheran thought as the need to proclaim the principle

²⁹ Andrew M. Weyermann, “Christ-centered preaching,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28:6 (December 2001): 594-9

³⁰ *Ibid.*

that Christ is the suffering God who “suffers with humanity”³¹ as being one of the ruling paradigms for interpreting Scripture. While this in itself may not constitute a major doctrinal error³², one could very well imagine a “Christ-centered Mass” in Roman Catholicism, whereby the host is lifted up and declared to be the literal Body of Christ that is to be worshipped.

Within Evangelicalism, the beginning of the New Calvinist movement as described by Colin Hansen³³ has seen the terms “Gospel-centered” and “Christ-centered” being almost reduced to slogans as synonyms referring to how prominent New Calvinist pastors such as Timothy J. Keller and Mark Driscoll preach and run their churches. Those who disagree with any of their methodologies or preaching are then implicitly regarded as not being “Gospel-centered” and not “Christ-centered” respectively, something which I have rather unpleasantly experienced.

The first point therefore is that the term “Christ-centered” by itself is non-specific. Without proper specificity attached to the term, the term itself may soon become a Shibboleth which means everything and therefore nothing at all as the New Calvinist movement popularize the terms even beyond Evangelicalism.

The second weakness which is seen in the model is that it tends towards doctrinal reductionism, which is to say that it tends to reduce the Scriptures to a certain skeleton of doctrines, or it accentuates some doctrines while downplaying others. Why is there such a tendency in the model?

³¹ *Ibid.*, 597

³² Christ suffered for us in history, but he does not suffer with us now in the present. Even if Christ were to suffer with us, that is so with respects to his humanity not to his deity which is immutable. We furthermore reject the Lutheran usage of the *communicatio idiomatum* to make anything predicated of Jesus to God in se.

³³ Colin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL, USA: Crossway Books, 2008)

In the beginning of his book,³⁴ Goldsworthy relates a story whereby a girl thinks the answer to her Sunday School teacher's question must always be Jesus. On a related note, he also wrote of how students heard sermons on the Old Testament which was preached in such a way that the part showing how the text links to Christ was seen as predictable add-ons to the sermons.³⁵

Such errors, which certainly should not be part of Christ-centered preaching, nevertheless hint at its opposite when it comes to theology. When divorced or estranged from its Reformed roots, the "Christ-centered" concept will lead to evaluation of doctrines to make them conform to one's "Christ-centered" interpretation of Scripture, which will lead to all manner of mischief. For example, in his critical article on Christ-centered interpretation,³⁶ Jason Hood relates how the "Christ-centered" formula has been abused, citing how he sometimes receive reports from his colleagues of various leaders and laity expressing dissatisfaction whenever the sermon or lesson did not conform to their expectation of being "exclusively centered on Christ."³⁷ He then quotes R. P. Gordon who

...targets mere Christocentric interpretation as reductionistic: "Christ in all the Scripture" is a slogan that has been misapplied by too many preachers and writers.'³⁸

In Hood's experience, it was the fear of moralism that caused a reaction in these leaders and laity against any form of moral instruction which they subjectively deem not sufficiently centered on Christ.

In the same vein, without an external standard of evaluation, the notion of being Christ-centered could result in doctrines being formed and held according to one's understanding of

³⁴ Goldsworthy, xi

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xii

³⁶ Jason Hood, "Christ-centred Interpretation Only? Moral Instruction from Scripture's Self-Interpretation as Caveat and Guide," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 27 No. 1 (Spring 2009): 50-69

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 56

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 58

how “Christ-centered” these doctrines are understood to be. Along this line, it can be thought that doctrines such as the order of God’s decrees are not Christ-centered and therefore can be safely ignored. Just like Hood’s detractors who opposed moral instruction that did not seem sufficiently Christ-centered, the importance of various biblical doctrines may be interpreted in this subjective manner, and the doctrines’ importance determined by their perceived relation to the Gospel and Christ.

Such a doctrinal reductionist approach can be regrettably seen most starkly in Keller’s openness to theistic evolution.³⁹ Keller does so even though evolution undermines the entire Gospel by denying the historicity of the Genesis creation account and the Fall, as well as making nonsense of the threat of God to Adam if death was already in the world before the Fall. In Keller’s opinion, the matter is not one that is Gospel-centered or Christ-centered, even though in actual fact it is both.

The Christ-centered model therefore has a tendency towards doctrinal reductionism. Like Neo-Orthodoxy, when the phrase “Christ-centered” instead of Scripture is used as a criterion for determining what is important to the faith especially in preaching, our understanding and communication of the relation and relative importance of various biblical doctrines to God’s people will be in error.

A partial resolution to these weaknesses can be done by understanding the usage and limitations of the “Christ-centered” phrase. That Christ is the object of our faith which all Scriptures point to is agreed by many. However, besides “Christ Alone” is also “Scripture Alone”. We must learn to recover the balance of the Reformation and not try to make everything depend on a single truth while neglecting other equally important truths. After all, there are five

³⁹ Timothy J. Keller, *The Reason for God — Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 87-93

solus in the Reformation, not merely Christ Alone (*Solus Christus*). Scripture circumscribes the content and the importance of various teachings in Scripture. Christ is the person whom we relate these teachings to, ontologically. Being Christ-centered should not mean that “we *only* teach and preach Christ and that *every* sermon must be focused squarely on Christ.”⁴⁰ It is not the number of times one mentions Christ’s name, as if uttering the word “Christ” many times in a sermon mean that the sermon is more Christ-centered. Neither must it be the case that Christ must be always mentioned as the main actor in a narrative, although He is always the ultimate character of the Gospel plot. There should not for example a pressure on preachers that in sermons preaching through Job, they must mention Christ everytime Job is mentioned.

In order to better resolve these perceived weaknesses, I would like to introduce a complementary motif for preaching—the three-fold image of God, which will hopefully improve the basic Christ-centered preaching model.

MAN MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

The Westminster Confession of Faith defines the image of God (*Imago Dei*) in Man as consisting of knowledge, righteousness and true holiness.⁴¹ The proof texts offered for this doctrine are Col. 3:10 and Eph. 4:24, which in their original biblical contexts refer to the new creation in Christ. Based upon biblical covenant theology, we recognize that Christ succeeded where Adam failed in fulfilling the terms of the Covenant of Works for us.⁴² Christ thus merited for us salvation and positionally restored us to what Adam was supposed to be— a creature perfectly reflecting God’s image in which he was made. Therefore, the *Imago Dei* indeed is creational as well as the goal of redemption, albeit the latter will be in a glorified form. Man

⁴⁰ Hood, 69

⁴¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter IV, Section II

⁴² Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd Ed. (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 440

always remains man and will not become God, and the highest state we can ever attain is the perfection and glorification of the *Imago Dei* in us.

If the *Imago Dei* is the original ideal as well as the goal of salvation, then it can be used as a motif for our preaching.⁴³ The idea of conversion as reframed according to the *Imago Dei* motif is the positional restoration of the fallen *Imago Dei* in Man. Similarly, the goal of edification or sanctification is the continual nurture of the *Imago Dei* in the aspect of holiness. The purpose of instruction is the growth of the *Imago Dei* in the aspect of knowledge. The Christ-centered focus in preaching is brought in through the fact that Christ as perfect Man reflects God's image perfectly, in His person being the image (εἰκὼν) of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) by nature (archetypically) and not by reflection (ectypically).

In the next few sections, we will look at how this motif of the three-fold image of God can be utilized in Christ-centered preaching.

PREACHING TO THE WHOLE MAN: KNOWLEDGE

and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (Col. 3:10)

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12: 2)

Men after the Fall are corrupted in all their faculties including the mind. Man in their rebellion against God are irrational like wild beasts (2 Peter 2:12), suppressing the little truth they know through General Revelation in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18-23). In evangelism, part of preaching therefore is to force Man to face up to the knowledge they have suppressed (Law) and then give to them the knowledge of the Gospel which they don't have as their only hope of

⁴³ In Johnson, 250-3, the teaching of the *Imago Dei* was expounded as an application for us. What I am however advocating here is its use in framing the preaching activity itself, not merely an application from the text on the topic.

salvation. Similarly, in instruction, preaching is to help us grow to have the mind of Christ so that we would come to know the God who saved us for His glory.

The motif of the *Imago Dei* in the aspect of knowledge therefore links both evangelism and instruction together. One aspect of preaching therefore is to impart knowledge to people regarding the things of God. Since true knowledge is based upon the Word of God, we evaluate all teachings not according to how “Christ-centered” they are to us, but according to the Scriptures. This therefore rectifies a weakness in the Christ-centered model as people have improperly applied it. The content and final authority for doctrines and preaching is the Scriptures, and we are to then relate these materials to Christ, not the other way around.

Such a way of looking also helps in reducing the reductionist tendency in the Christ-centered model. The material for preaching is thus determined by Scripture, and then linked to Christ. It is therefore necessary for preachers to wrestle with obscure doctrines and preach them in a Christ-centered manner like for example the order of God’s decrees, instead of subjectively placing them *a priori* on the shelf of “scholastic doctrines” that are deemed not Christ-centered.

Preaching is to be Word-centered epistemologically and Christ-centered ontologically. Imparting knowledge Christocentrically implies showing how Christ is the fulfillment of all knowledge even as we ourselves are given knowledge from God’s Word.

PREACHING TO THE WHOLE MAN: RIGHTEOUSNESS

and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24)

The aspect of righteousness is correlated to the biblical mediatory office of the king. As Johnson states, “Kings and judges were responsible to reflect God’s *authority*, his right to order

his servants' lives according to his perfect justice."⁴⁴ This aspect of righteousness therefore refers to right attitudes and actions on our part. In the area of right attitudes, we are to judge rightly (Jn. 7:24) just as God judges. Our actions are then to follow in obedience to do what is pleasing to our Lord.

Preaching along this aspect of righteousness calls upon people to assent to God's truths and God's judgments and display the fruits God requires. This would therefore cover the idea of preaching to edify. Preachers are to show everyone what God commands them to be and to do them. It is not just related to a surface idea of moral change but change that comes from the heart and its attitudes. Just as the examples given in the Sermon on the Mount, radical change is called for and demanded by God.

Seeing this aspect in the light of its place in the *Imago Dei* motif brings in the idea of Christ as the perfect Man, who is both our example as well as the one who fulfills the divine demand for us. Such an approach saves the demands for moral change from charges of moralistic legalism. In a paradoxical manner, we are called to be righteous yet God in Christ is our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30). Both have to be proclaimed with the former being grounded in the latter, yet the former is not to be minimized in order for the sermon to be considered Christ-centered, as had happened in Hood's experience.⁴⁵

Preaching therefore is applicatory. Using the *Imago Dei* motif, an advantage over the typical Christ-centered model here is that application is integral to the motif itself, whereas in the typical Christ-centered model, is it necessary to the system yet not integral to it. What this means is that although application is to be done in the Christ-centered model as seen in Clowney's

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 253. Emphasis original.

⁴⁵ Hood, 55-6

diagram of Christ-centered interpretation,⁴⁶ it is a step done after Christ-centered interpretation. Christ-centered interpretation therefore can exist apart from application, although it should lead to application in the Christ-centered model.

PREACHING TO THE WHOLE MAN: HOLINESS

Holiness refers to our standing before God. It is correlated to the ministerial office of the priest. According to Johnson,

Priests entered into God's holy presence, bringing sacrifices to remove pollution and effect reconciliation—to reestablish a *relationship* of intimacy and blessing between the Lord and his wayward servants.⁴⁷

This aspect of holiness deals primarily with our relationship with God. Fallen men are in a relationship of wrath with God and need to be saved from that into a relationship of love. Those who are saved and now enjoy the love of God for them similarly need to grow deeper into that relationship. In all this, we are called to be holy, as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16), for God who is holy cannot tolerate that which is unholy.

Preaching which takes into account the aspect of holiness therefore deal with these issues. It will have an evangelistic bent to it as unbelievers remain in a state of wrath under God. For believers, the preaching of the Gospel reminds us of our constant sinfulness in the flesh, and drives us back to the Cross and the righteousness of God imputed to us. Knowing the holiness of God, we know that the only reason why we are not under wrath but enjoy God's favor has nothing to do with our inherent goodness but solely because Christ is our substitute paying the penalty for our sins, and giving us His righteousness so that God will see us as holy. This should drive us to continually praise Him. From the position of positional holiness before the Lord, we

⁴⁶ See footnote 17 above.

⁴⁷ Johnson, 253

are called to be actually holy too and offer our bodies as pleasing sacrifices to God (Rom. 12:1). Our lives are not our own but to be lived according to God's will.

So while the aspect of righteousness shows us that we ought to live rightly according to God's law, the aspect of holiness should draw forth from us the joy that sees us willingly lay down our lives for God because He first loved us.

How does this three-fold analysis of a passage aid in formulating a sermon? This could be perhaps better answered through looking at an actual text and showing how a Christ-centered sermon could have benefited using this three-fold motif.

AN EXAMPLE: ROMANS 9: 19-24

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? (Rom. 9:19-24)

The doctrine of reprobation taught in Scripture is a hard doctrine. In an exposition of Romans 9, the tendency for all of us is to focus on God's glorious election of those who are being saved. Reprobation may be deemed as a sad necessity or even a "side effect" of election, as the two are sides of the same coin. Since reprobation is not properly a work of Christ but of the Father (although Christ is the judge at Judgment Day), it is unsure to what extent a typical Christ-centered sermon could preach on the topic of reprobation instead of glossing over it and running straight to the comforting doctrine of election.

Utilizing the three-fold *Imago Dei* motif, a sermon could be prepared on this passage as follows. Flowing from the aspect of knowledge, the doctrine of reprobation will be laid out

plainly as it is. Under the aspect of righteousness, we must show the congregation that God is not squeamish about reprobation but in fact glories in it, and so we must join God in praising Him for His wondrous work. God “desires to show His wrath and to make known His power” and the reprobates serve that function. We must of course not teach this doctrine as if we are happy that people are damned to hell, for we are by nature children of wrath no different from them. We praise God after all for the rightness and holiness of His action, not that we love to see people condemned to perdition.

Under holiness, the appropriate emotional response to this doctrine of Reprobation is not glee or sorrow or even anger at God but awe. Firstly, we are to be awed that God decrees reprobation on Man for the purpose of manifesting His glory in His wrath. God’s glory is so precious that it must be expressed in such a manner whereby souls are formally destined for hell by God’s decree (although materially it is their sins that earned them their future damnation). Secondly, we are to be awed and humbled because reprobation is meant to make known to the elect the riches of His grace by showing what we are saved from. The beauty and depth of God’s grace is shown in contrast to the earned damnation of the reprobates, as the light from a lamp is most prominent when it shines into the darkness as opposed to shining in broad daylight.

In all these three aspects, what is required of us from God in the proclamation of His Word in this passage is (1) our growth in the knowledge of God’s truth on this matter, (2) our growth in being Christ-like in the sense that we learn to love what God loves and hates what He hates, and (3) that our sense of awe and wonder at God’s glory as well as His exceedingly abundant grace will be increased causing us to love and glorify God more for the saving power of His grace in our lives. Seeing the awful plight of the reprobate, we tremble in godly fear, for if not for the grace of God saving us, we would have faced the same terrible judgments for our sins.

The Gospel message would then be proclaimed in the sermon as the only way of salvation, noting that although only the elect are saved, the elect manifest their election in responding to Christ's invitation to repent and turn to Him. If anyone will truly come to Christ, he would be of the elect (Jn. 6:37ff).

It is hoped that this example would show how the three-fold *Imago Dei* motif can be utilized to complement the Christ-centered model. We do not have to explicitly make everything in the passage about Christ. This passage for example does not speak formally of Christ (although materially it does), so we do not bring Christ into the basic exposition of this message as we initially exegete Scripture and apply it to us. Yet, Christ stands behind this entire passage—As reprobation serves God and serves the outworking of His decree of election, it ultimately serves the glory and honor of Christ.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have seen and evaluated the Christ-centered model and found weaknesses in its practical application. The three-fold motif of the Image of God was suggested as a complement to improve on the model, and an example showing how this could work was given through expositing the passage of Romans 9:19-24. This motif may not be without its own weaknesses and more thought should be given to its workability, but it is hoped that this suggestion would inspire more thought on the topic, such that biblical interpretation and preaching could be even further improved until finally we “all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). Amen.

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