

## Themes in Current Homiletical Theory

### *Redemptive-Historical Preaching*

By Jacob Haag

Charles Spurgeon is one of the most famous preachers in homiletical history. In his massive seven-volume set on the history of preaching, Hughes Oliphant Old gives this nineteenth-century Reformed Baptist preacher from London high praise, "There was no voice in the Victorian pulpit as resonant, no preacher as beloved by the people, no orator as prodigious as Charles Haddon Spurgeon."<sup>1</sup> In his sermon entitled, "Christ Precious to Believers," Spurgeon tells a story that compares Christ to the grand metropolis of London:

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 savour of Christ in it."<sup>2</sup>

*Christ is the center of all Scripture.*

Spurgeon was convinced that the best preaching is focused on Christ. No matter the text, the sermon must lead people to Christ, because Christ is the center of *all* Scripture. As Jesus taught the Emmaus disciples "what was said *in all the Scriptures* concerning himself" (Lk 24:27, emphasis added), so redemptive-historical preachers who follow Spurgeon preach Christ from all Scripture. This is what the redemptive-historical, Christ-centered model of preaching is all about.<sup>3</sup>

### Basic Features of Redemptive-Historical Preaching

Redemptive-historical preaching is based on redemptive-historical hermeneutics. Redemptive-historical hermeneutics (also called a biblical-theological approach)<sup>4</sup> is a way of interpreting Scripture in its grand canonical context of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. This four-part drama<sup>5</sup> of human history finds its grand climax in Christ. History is uniquely *redemptive* history, because God has been crafting the story all along to give hints of what the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15) would later do in his redemptive work. God is still crafting this story to lead to the day when all creation will be redeemed and restored in the new heavens and new earth (Rom 8:19-25). Particularly in its Vosian form,<sup>6</sup> redemptive-historical hermeneutics emphasizes the covenantal structure of

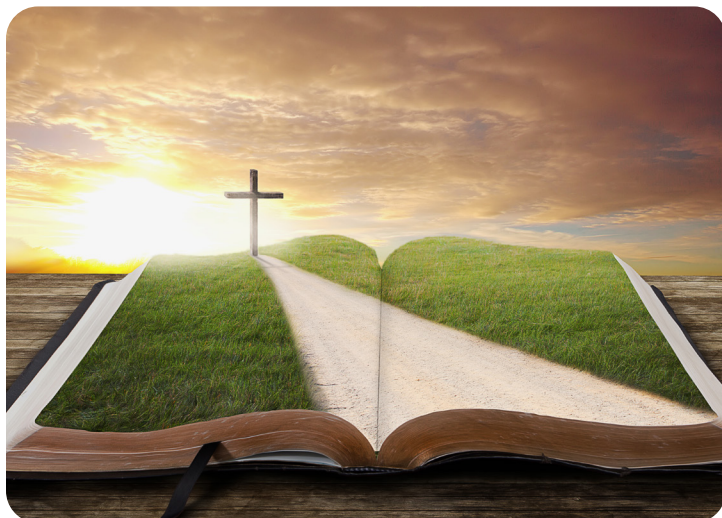
## The best preaching is focused on Christ.

Scripture to argue for its organic unity and Christocentric nature in response to critical approaches of Scripture that divorce the OT from the NT and which relegate Christ to something other than the main character from cover to cover. Here are some basic features of redemptive-historical preaching:

- *Redemptive-historical preaching is Christocentric.* It does not matter if the text is from the OT or NT—or if the genre is narrative, prophecy, wisdom literature, Gospel, epistles, or apocalyptic—in one way or another, the text is about Christ. All roads lead to him.
- *Redemptive-historical preaching is typological.* It does not only emphasize prophecy about Christ, but it also emphasizes how historical persons and events foreshadow Christ.
- *Redemptive-historical preaching is textual, exegetical, and academic.* Redemptive-historical preaching is not for the faint of heart. Sermons are usually thirty minutes or more. Preaching is robust, especially because it often features *lectio continua*. Sometimes redemptive-historical preaching feels like reading a popular commentary on the Bible.
- *Redemptive-historical preaching is artful.* It does not simply exegete a word/theme in its immediate context. It then bridges to how that word/theme is used throughout Scripture. Finally, it demonstrates how that word/theme climaxes in Christ. When first exposed to this approach, hearers are often amazed at the artistry of redemptive-historical preaching.

To illustrate a redemptive-historical approach with a simple example, here are selections from my Advent 4B sermon from 2 Samuel 7:8-16, with the theme, “Build a Bigger, Better House!”

Think of it like a pit stop on a road trip. For example, my parents live in Wisconsin. You have to travel through Chicago to



get to Wisconsin. Can I say, “I traveled to Chicago?” Sure. We traveled there and stopped to get gas, food, and take a break. But I don’t travel to Chicago for the exclusive purpose of filling up my car with gas and grabbing a bite to eat. Chicago’s not the ultimate destination. The ultimate destination is when I turn on Meadowbrook Lane to see family. In the same way, can we say, “Is this promise fulfilled in Solomon?” Sure. The promise has to get traced through him. But Solomon is like a pit stop for lunch and gas. As good as it is, it’s not the ultimate destination. The place this prophetic road finally ends is in Christ, when Gabriel announced to Mary that her son Jesus would sit on David’s throne. ...

God promises to build us a bigger, better house—an eternal kingdom—through David’s messianic descendant. To the bigger, better Son of David God would ultimately say, with the deepest significance of the words, “*I will be his father, and he will be my son.*” On Christmas Day, God’s Son, begotten from all eternity, also became Mary’s son. To the bigger, better Son of David God would ultimately say, with the deepest significance of the words, “*I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands.*” On Good Friday, God’s Son was punished with Pilate’s flogging, not because he sinned, but because he took our sin on himself. To the bigger, better Son of David God would ultimately say, with the deepest significance of the words, “*Your house and your kingdom will endure forever.*” On Easter, God’s Son proved that he could destroy this temple and rebuild it in three days, because Solomon’s temple that manifested God’s presence on earth was manifest once and for all in Jesus’ body on earth (Jn 2:19). The living and reigning Christ would endure for all eternity. Jesus takes what Solomon did and makes it bigger and better.

## Objections against Redemptive-Historical Preaching

To go back to Spurgeon’s analogy, redemptive-historical preaching begins with the text and finds a road to Christ. The first major objection to redemptive-historical preaching, therefore, revolves around the question, “When is building a road to Christ legitimate? Is that connection really there, or is it simply the preacher’s fanciful imagination?” That is not simply a homiletical question; that is a hermeneutical question.

On one side of this debate is the position that a connection to Christ is only legitimate if the NT explicitly makes the connection. For example, if the NT does not explicitly say this is fulfilled in Christ, it is illegitimate allegory. The problem with this view is that it is a reductionistic and oversimplified view of what is a very nuanced and complicated aspect of current biblical research, the NT usage of the OT. This view essentially denies the phenomenon of an allusion. Many biblical authors (and preachers) use words or themes in a sophisticated way to refer to something else, without necessarily saying, “This happened so that these words would be

fulfilled.” They are implying that, but they don’t explicitly say that in such convenient terms. On the other side of this debate is the position that a preacher can use anything to make a legitimate connection to Christ. For example, any mention of the color red becomes a connection to Christ’s blood, any mention of water becomes a connection to Baptism, or any mention of bread becomes a connection to Communion. The problem with this view is that it ignores the immediate context, which in many cases has nothing to do with Christ’s blood, Baptism, or Communion. The limited scope of this article prevents us from dealing with specific examples, but simply put, in between those two sides of the debate is where we want to be. Preachers need to use every legitimate avenue possible to get to Christ. If Lutherans thought they have found them all, they will be challenged and enriched by reading redemptive-historical homiletics, even if they do not agree with every connection they make (as I do not). There are explicit prophetic connections to Christ where we are on sure ground (see my sermon above). There are allegorical connections to Christ where we are on shaky ground. In the middle are many cases where we use inter-canonical allusions to say (with various degrees of certainty) to what degree they connect to Christ. When we are in this messy middle, we can preach how *general themes* point to Christ, without saying we know for sure that *specific details* point to Christ. That requires a nuanced approach from preachers today.

To go back to the definition of redemptive-historical preaching, redemptive-historical preaching focuses on God’s action throughout redemptive history. The second major objection to redemptive-historical preaching, therefore, revolves around the question, “What about the people? Is preaching only this grand exposition of the biblical story? Isn’t it also supposed to encourage the congregation to actually do something on Monday morning?” That is not simply a homiletical question; that is a hermeneutical question.

On one side of the debate is the position that the very purpose of Scriptural revelation is to record God’s action for us, not our action for God, and any focus on doing something for God by imitating biblical figures is contrary to the purpose of redemptive history. For example, sermons that urge people to be more like David as he fights Goliath are bound to lead to legalism.<sup>7</sup> On the other side of the debate is the position that Scripture includes many exhortations to godly living, and an exclusive focus on redemptive history is contrary to the ultimate purpose of Scripture, which is that people would respond to the text by believing or doing something. For example, sermons that constantly use the four-part redemptive-historical context are bound to be this overly abstract, grand sweep of biblical history that has precious little to do with everyday life.<sup>8</sup> So where do we want to be? We need to emphasize that the central character of all Scripture is God (specifically Christ), but Scripture’s many exhortations toward godly living

*When is building a road to Christ legitimate?*



show that the Holy Spirit was not only concerned about recording redemptive history. He was also concerned with how believers respond to redemptive history in their participation in the work of God’s kingdom. Preaching that focuses on doing something for God or imitating other saints *can be* moralistic, but it does not *have to be* moralistic.<sup>9</sup> The motivation is crucial. We do so, not because we are trying to gain more favor before God or improve our standing with other people, but because we are responding in gratitude for what God has done for us and wanting to advance his kingdom for his glory, not our own. That requires a nuanced approach from preachers today.

### *What about the people?*

To illustrate how to properly preach the imitation of Christ, while being sensitive to the complexities of the redemptive-historical/exemplaristic debates, here are selections from my Easter 4A sermon from 1 Peter 2:19–25, with the theme, “Be Like Your Slaughtered Shepherd.”

Christ knows exactly what it is like to suffer unjustly for something you did not deserve. To be clear, Christ is first and foremost your Savior, who did what you could not when he died in your place to take away all your sins. You can never be like him in taking away your sins, nor do you ever need to be, because he has already done that for you. But that does not negate that Christ is also your example. He does call you to follow him on a path of suffering, and he inspires you to do what he did. So be like your slaughtered Shepherd, because he calls you to it.

Still today, it’s easy to feel like slaughtered sheep. Yes, we all want a nice, easy life, where God paves this smooth four-lane highway with no traffic and no problems straight to heaven. But this is not the Christian life! This was not the path for Christ. Christ suffered all the unjust beatings during his passion to perfectly fulfill God’s law for all the times we have resented

or avoided or complained about our suffering. Christ took up our guilt on the cross, where our sins died away and where our righteous lives spring to life. Here's the key: sheep are not on a different path than their Shepherd. You are united to your Savior Jesus, which means you will suffer unjustly too. What do you do when you feel like slaughtered sheep? Remember that Christ calls you to it. For the children here, Christ calls you to simply walking away from the class bully who wants to rile you up and make fun of you and fight with you. For the university students here, Christ calls you to humbly admit your faults in a cut-throat academic environment that just wants to prove how much smarter you are than everyone else. For the young professionals here, Christ calls you to embrace biblical sexuality when all your friends are telling you to do whatever you want with your own body. For the families here, Christ calls you to carve out time in your evenings and on your weekends for church, catechism, and Sunday school. For the retirees here, Christ calls you to generously support his church financially at a time when people are concerned about how big a retirement account they can have or how big an inheritance they can pass to their children. Because Christ does that for you, wouldn't you do this all the more? So be more and more like your slaughtered Shepherd.<sup>10</sup>

*We benefit from being much more familiar with redemptive-historical preaching.*

Redemptive-historical preaching is the dominant paradigm in confessional Reformed preaching. Unless Lutherans have read widely outside their circles, they may not be very familiar with the intricacies of this approach. By now it should be apparent that there is plenty within this model of interpreting and preaching Scripture that Lutherans can appreciate and use, especially when preaching from the OT. We benefit from being much more familiar with redemptive-historical preaching.

## For Further Reading

- For more on preaching Christ from all Scripture, see my forthcoming review of *Him We Proclaim* in the Shepherd's Study: [www.wisluthsem.org/grow-in-grace/shepherds-study](http://www.wisluthsem.org/grow-in-grace/shepherds-study)
- For an extensive example of redemptive-historical exegesis, see my previous *WLQ* article (118:1), "The Indicative Behind the Imperative in James 2:1-13"
- For more on preaching the imitation of Christ, see my forthcoming *WLQ* article (121:1), "Preaching Christ as Example? Paraenesis in 1 Peter 2:21-25"

<sup>3</sup> For redemptive-historical homiletics texts, start with *Him We Proclaim* by Dennis Johnson. Then consider also: *Christ-Centered Preaching* by Bryan Chapell, *Preaching* by Timothy Keller, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* or *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* by Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* by Graeme Goldsworthy, and *Preaching and Biblical Theology* by Edmund Clowney.

<sup>4</sup> Outside of our circles, biblical theology is not simply defined as exegesis or isagogics. It has the more nuanced definition I am describing here.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of a "drama" is based on Calvin's comparison of Christ's cross to a "magnificent theater" where "the inestimable goodness of God is displayed before the whole world." Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John 2:73*.

<sup>6</sup> Geerhardus Vos taught at Princeton and was a leading confessional Reformed voice in early America. He is to the Reformed world what C.F.W. Walther is to the Lutheran world. See "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 234-267.

<sup>7</sup> See Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 117-118, 163.

<sup>8</sup> Watkins calls Krabbendam's comparison of redemptive-historical preaching to an airplane that flies over the heads of people and the realities of life a "near infamous critique." Watkins, *The Drama of Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 7, fn. 22.

<sup>9</sup> In his section on "be like," "be good," and "be disciplined" messages, Chapell writes, "There are many 'be' messages in Scripture, but they always reside in a redemptive context. . . . 'Be' messages are not wrong in themselves; they are wrong by themselves." Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 294 (emphasis original).

<sup>10</sup> Full versions of this sermon excerpt and the one above are available at [worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/preach-the-word-volume-28/](http://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/preach-the-word-volume-28/)

