

PREACHING CHRIST IN AFRICA TODAY

By Sidney J. Garland

Introduction

As a lecturer in practical theology, I am approaching this topic from a pastoral perspective. However, good practice is vitally linked to good theology which in turn must be based on sound interpretation (hermeneutics). First of all, then, I examine the hermeneutical foundations for preaching Christ from all the Scriptures. Secondly, I consider proper practical ways of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. Thirdly, I confront several problems that prevent us from seeing and preaching Christ as we should. I then proceed to some pastoral exhortations towards preaching Christ. Finally, I conclude with some pitfalls to be avoided in preaching Christ. I gladly acknowledge my indebtedness in this article to the stimulating book by Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*.¹

A. The Hermeneutical Foundations for Preaching Christ from all the Scriptures

Hermeneutical Opposition

Several interpreters forbid us to use the Christological approach found in the New Testament. They include some who believe that Christians should reject the Old Testament altogether as sub-Christian.² The essential problem here is lack of faith in the Old Testament as the Word of God.³ Instead of submitting to the canon of Scripture as recognised and accepted since the days of the early church they want human reason to rule over the canon, accepting some parts and rejecting others. Others (including Jews and Christians), while seeing great value in the Old Testament, want us to read it independently of the New Testament as a “non-Christian book.”⁴ But in effect this is asking us to read the Old Testament like unbelieving Jews with a veil over our minds (2 Cor 3:15, 16). Others want us to treat the Old Testament as a pre-Christian book, addressed only to Israel. According to this position, the Old Testament does not on its own directly speak of Christ, but can only be linked to Christ through by the authority of a New Testament passage.⁵ Now there is a sense in which it is true that chronologically, the Old Testament is before Christ (BC). And certainly, in the progressive nature of revelation and redemptive history, the New Testament brings something new and amazing into view. But as Sidney Greidanus points out you would not think of the foundations of a house as pre-house.⁶ The foundations are a very essential part of the house. The headwaters of a river are not “non-river” or “pre-river”; they are an essential part of the river as it flows downstream.⁷ Furthermore, to say that the Old Testament is “pre-Christian” is a contradiction of Jesus own statements that “these are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39), and that the Old Testament “is written about me” (Luke 24:44).

Hermeneutical Imposition

Christological interpretation does not mean that we are to impose Christ on every verse or find him mysteriously hidden in every sentence of the Old Testament. We are not to read Christ back *into* the Old Testament. We don't want to go back to a medieval allegorical interpretation (where you can make the Scripture mean anything). There *are* dangers of spiritualizing (allegorizing) and moralizing. In a recent example heard over the radio in Nigeria, a preacher was handling the text, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis

2:18).⁸ From there he proceeded straight to say that people are lonely because they lack Jesus Christ. In contrast to this, we must pursue responsible exegesis, wrestling to understand the original meaning and intention of the author. This is why we believe in the study of the biblical languages, as well as all the related disciplines of biblical studies.

Hermeneutical Submission

It is because of the authority of Christ himself and the New Testament as that both the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament and the consequent Christ-centred preaching become obligatory on us today. In our fear of *eisegesis*, we must not run away from legitimate Christological interpretation, including legitimate typology. In rejecting allegorical preaching, but neglecting Christological preaching we are in danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water. It is time to reaffirm our faith, the faith of Jesus himself and all the New Testament authors, that the Old Testament is the Word of God, and also that it is thoroughly Christian.⁹ It is Judaizing Christ-denying rabbis who have deviated from the proper interpretation of the Old Testament and thus from the right to the (sole) ownership of the Old Testament. The owner of the vineyard has given the vineyard to others (Lk 20:16). Yes, unbelieving Jews remain the traditional owners, but the rightful owners are the Christian believers of all nations who are children of Abraham by faith (Romans 4:16-17).¹⁰

Christ-centred Hermeneutics and Preaching in the New Testament

The description of what happened in Bible times is not necessarily a prescription for us today. But if we understand the reasons why the apostles preached Christ, then we will have gone a long way to appreciating the importance of having the same approach.¹¹ The New Testament preaching was Christ-centred because their interpretation of both Scripture and the events they experienced was Christ-centred.¹² That Christ is the central focus of all of Scripture is clear not only from New Testament testimony but also from its Christological interpretation of the Old Testament:

1. Christ-centred Interpretation of all of Scripture according to Luke

In the telling the story of Jesus, Luke shows that Jesus used the Old Testament Scriptures to present himself to Israel (cf. Luke 4:18ff.). The Lord Jesus is the point at which all the different lines of the Biblical revelation meet. *The Christological focus of the Old Testament* may be confirmed from the Bible itself. The method of the Biblical writers in handling of the OT becomes a model for our own handling of the Old Testament. Their method goes back to the teachings of our Lord himself in Luke 24:25-47. Here Jesus tells his disciples that “all the Scriptures” including specifically the Law of Moses, *all* the Prophets (that would include the history books, known to the Jews as the Former Prophets), and the Psalms (probably a term intended to cover all the poetical books) have spoken concerning his suffering (death) and resurrection and the universal proclamation of the gospel (repentance and forgiveness) in Christ's name. Here we have the example of Christ the Exegete at work. Our resurrected Lord Himself interprets the Scriptures and begins a short but very important hermeneutics course with his disciples. We should note the following points:

a. A major obstacle to understanding is the heart of the interpreter: “slow of heart to believe all the prophets have spoken” (v. 25).

- b. The Lord Jesus helps them by engaging in the task of hermeneutics/exegesis: “he explained to them” (v. 27); “he opened the Scriptures” to them (v. 32).
- c. The focus of his interpretation is Christological (Christ-centred). He explained “what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself” (v. 27), especially his Messianic suffering and glorification (v. 26; also Luke 24:44-48).
- d. The result: as they hear Jesus talking, opening the Scriptures to them, then their hearts that are no longer slow and unresponsive, but aflame, burning (v. 32), and from that moment they long and plead for his presence – “they urged him strongly, Stay with us” (v. 29) – and rush immediately to proclaim the good news to others (v. 33-35).

2. Christ-centred Preaching of John the Baptist according to John’s Gospel

John the Baptist is a worthy example of someone who preached Jesus: “John saw Jesus coming towards him and he said, Look, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). The same John the Baptist later uses a wedding illustration which is very helpful. “You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him’. The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. He must become greater, I must become less” (Jn 3:28-30). John has recognized the crucial difference between himself and Jesus – he (John) *receives* from above (Jn 3:29) while Jesus *is* from above as the eternal Son of God (Jn 1:1; 3:13, 31). And so John’s ministry must always aim at giving the glory to Jesus. In Africa there is a tradition of having a “committee of friends” who can assist a bridegroom with the preparations for the wedding. In the western tradition one of them is called the “best man” but actually he and everyone knows that the real “best man” of the day is the bridegroom, and woe to the best man who tries to come between the bride and the bridegroom. The friend is always alert to listen to the bridegroom’s voice, and is willing as a true friend to sacrifice, suffer (Jn 3:24) and even to die for his friend (Jn 15:13). J. H. Jowett put it like this: “We are to be the friends of the Bridegroom (Jesus), winning men, not to ourselves but to him, match-making for the Lord, abundantly satisfied when we have brought the bride and the Bridegroom together.”¹³

Before leaving John the Baptist, we may be surprised by the doubts he had when in prison under Herod (Matt 11:2, 3). At least he took his questions to the right person – Jesus himself, and got a clear Biblical answer (Matt 11:4, 5) affirming that Jesus’ wholistic word and deed ministry was indeed the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecies (Is 35:5, 6). However, Jesus understood better why he was not using the axe to cut down the tree of wickedness as John expected (Matt 3:10-12). It was for the same reason that Jesus, in the synagogue of Nazareth, stopped his reading of Isaiah 61 before the phrase “the day of vengeance of our God” (cf. Is 61:2 and Luke 4:19). This is because Jesus did not come to judge (John 3:17) and finish with evil and evil people, but to save and forgive his enemies (by taking our judgement on his own head on the cross). In this way the final judgement is delayed and a door of grace remains open so that many of all nations could come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

3. The Christ-centred preaching of the Apostles in Acts

When the Apostles addressed a Jewish congregation they wasted no time in claiming that the events of Christ’s life, death, resurrection, Pentecost, and the mission to the Gentiles were prophesied throughout the Old Testament (N.B. *all* the prophets). We should note that this

was the main focus of their preaching, teaching and witnessing: 2:14-40; 3:12-26 (esp. 18, 24); 5:42; 9:22; 10:43; 13:27; 15:15; 17:2, 18, 31; 18:7, 28; 26:22, 23; 28:31. For this Christological interpretation of the Old Testament they were willing to lay down their lives. This is particularly clear in the case of Stephen (Acts 7) who saw every story in the Old Testament as reaching its climax in Christ. Let us also take note of the substantial things that they said *about* Christ:

- (1) The life of Christ was the fulfilment of Scripture (see above texts)
- (2) The death of Jesus was by the plan of God (2:23).
- (3) The cross had a purpose for our salvation (20:28).
- (4) The proofs of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (1:3; 5:32)
- (5) The reality of encounter and fellowship with the risen Christ - the role of Jesus in giving encouragement and world mission instructions to the servants of God; his appearances to Paul.
- (6) The current kingdom rule of Jesus / present reality of the kingdom of God and urgent need for repentance and submission to him as Lord.
- (7) The relationship of Jesus and the Spirit - acting as one in the direction of mission.
- (8) The coming encounter with Jesus as the one who will come again to judge the world (17:31) and to restore all things (3:21).

4. The Christ-centred Preaching of the Apostle Paul

Paul is another clear example of a New Testament preacher who preached Christ. This is clear from his sermons in the book of Acts, but also from Paul's own statements about his ministry: "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified . . ." (1 Cor 1:22, 23ff). And Paul continues: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Paul can affirm that, in his ministry to the Galatians, "Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified" (Gal 3:1) and he goes on to say "may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14). Paul was very clear about his calling and message: "that I might preach him (Christ) among the Gentiles" (Gal 1:16); "to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8); "we proclaim him (Christ)" (Col 1:28; cf. 2:2, 3).

5. The Christ-centred teaching of the Apostle Peter

Having described the full scope of our salvation, based firmly on the resurrection of Christ, Peter in 1 Peter 1:10-12 says four things about the Old Testament:-

- (1) The Old Testament prophets were deeply concerned about this salvation that we are enjoying as Christians (1 Peter 1:10).

(2) The teaching of the Old Testament prophets is unified since it derives from one source – the Spirit of Christ in them (vs. 11, cf. 2 Peter 1:19-21). Ultimately the whole Bible has one author and ultimately the Old Testament is a Christian book because its author is the God of the Christians.

(3) The focus of their teaching can be briefly summed up: the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow (vs. 11).

(4) The full benefit of the prophets' ministry was not enjoyed by themselves or their contemporaries, but in fact they were serving those who would see their message fulfilled (vs. 12).

Those who do not believe in the sovereignty of God will have difficulty all that Peter says here. They have difficulty accepting all predictive prophecy and the over-ruling of events and words so that they could have a future meaning greater than understood by the original human author.

Preliminary Hermeneutical Conclusions

Christian interpreters are not to read Christ *into* the Old Testament. Rather they are to bring out (exegete) what the Spirit of God intended, namely to point to Christ. So the Old Testament cannot be rightly interpreted without the light of the New Testament. Augustine was right when he wrote his famous words: "The New Testament is in the Old concealed, the Old Testament is in the New revealed." The Old Testament was thus rightly claimed by the early church as part of the Christian canon. Before the writing of the New Testament, the Old Testament functioned as the only Scriptures of the early Church. However, many preachers today have difficulties in seeing Christ in many passages of Scripture, especially in the Old Testament. There needs to be a re-orientation. Theological seminary courses on hermeneutics, biblical theology, Old Testament theology, New Testament theology, and even systematic theology should help us to understand the unity and covenantal structure of the Bible, and begin to see and preach Jesus in every part of Scripture.

B. Proper Practical Ways of Preaching Christ from the Old Testament

It is time to reflect on our practice of these principles. How much do we preach Christ? How much do we cling to Jesus, and teach our people their need of Jesus - for their salvation but also for their life and service. And do we know how to preach Christ from the whole Bible? How often do we preach from the Old Testament? Check the pages of your Bible. You may likely find that the New Testament section is more used, more worn. Why this neglect of the Old Testament? Do we think that it does not present Christ to us? It seems that we still have difficulties in preaching Christ from the Old Testament. We know that there is a problem with many of the African instituted white garment churches who love to preach the rules and rituals of the Old Testament, falling into legalism and missing a major purpose of the Old Testament - which is to point us to Christ. However, it seems that many evangelicals and Pentecostals also fail to see Christ in many Old Testament, and even when handling New Testament texts, we still fail to preach Christ. But at the end of every message, we should be able to ask this question: Has Christ been preached? So how do we go about it?

The advice of the great Baptist preacher, C. H. Spurgeon, to a young preacher still demonstrates great wisdom: "Don't you know, young man, that from every town and every

village and every hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London? . . . So from every text in Scripture there is road towards the great metropolis, Christ. And my dear brother, your business, is when you get to a text, to say, now, where is the road to Christ? . . . I have never found a text that had not got a road to Christ in it, and if ever I do find 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.”¹⁴ A caution to be added is to make sure that we find the legitimate and proper roads to Christ. Not every preacher, Spurgeon included, gets the right road to Christ. Sound expository preaching always requires these three basic steps: “from (1) determining the original meaning, to (2) the meaning in the context of the whole canon (including whole OT and NT), to (3) the application of this meaning for our hearers today”¹⁵ We have to be careful to give each of these steps enough weight. There could be a danger of jumping too quickly to the New Testament. However, a more common problem in my view is not to make the jump at all. Greidanus explains that there are seven major ways of preaching Christ from all of Scripture:

1. The way of Redemptive-Historical Progression – the New Testament proclaims a Christ who was a fulfilment of OT history – everything was moving towards its climax in Christ. The Bible story is His Story: Creation, Fall, Redemption: Redemptive acts in the Old Testament are pushing toward the ultimate redemptive acts in Jesus (Redemption Accomplished in the finished work of Christ), now followed by Christ’s redemptive acts in our lives by his Holy Spirit (Redemption Applied), and will be completed (Phil 1:6) when Christ returns for the Final redemption (Rom 8:18-25), and the final New Creation (Rev 21-22). Thus stories like that of David and Goliath, rather than being a mere giant-killing “Superman” story, link and point to the battle of Christ and Satan that started in Genesis 3:15 and continues through Matt 12:29, Luke 10:18, John 12:31, Colossians 2:15 to Revelation 19:11-16. Thus the individual stories need to be interpreted in the light of the “big picture,”¹⁶ the over-arching meta-narrative. By God’s sovereign grace alone, the Old Covenant leads progressively and climactically to the New Covenant. This is why we need a proper hermeneutic that helps us to see the unity of the Bible, and the progression from Old Testament to New Testament and from Old Covenant to New Covenant. If we can remember that every sentence and every text has a context, and that context is ultimately the on-going history of God’s dealings with his covenant people, a history which is always moving progressively towards one goal, i.e., the death and resurrection of Christ. As Chris Wright puts it, “The OT tells the story which Jesus completes.”¹⁷ In this sense all of Scripture has a Christological focus.

2. The Way of Promise-Fulfilment. The covenant promises and types reach completion in Christ. Many OT prophecies / promises are fulfilled progressively until they finally bring us Christ.¹⁸ For example, the Old Testament promises of the gathering of Israel is fulfilled first in the return of Israel from exile, but then Jesus also carries out a gathering ministry, and sends his disciples out to gather (Matt 12), but the prophecy is eventually fulfilled in the final ingathering (described in Revelation). In the case of Joel 2:31 we find that Joel’s apocalyptic vision is partially fulfilled in Old Testament judgements on Israel, partly in the darkness over Calvary, and then on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2, “this is that”), and finally in the Second Coming of Jesus (see book of Revelation). Turning to Isaiah 61:1-4, we find that this partially fulfilled in the return of the remnant in 583 BC, but then also in Jesus First Coming. In the synagogue in Nazareth Jesus quotes Is 61, announcing the Dawn of Jubilee through his own ministry, but with Judgment delayed (cf. Luke 4), until the prophecy it is completely fulfilled in the final Day of Judgment and the full eternal Jubilee.

3. The Way of Typology – because the NT writers believe that Jesus has ushered in the Messianic age, they see God’s past acts of redemption as shadows, prefigurations, and types of the new age that has dawned in Christ. This type of interpretation was carried too far in the direction of allegory in the medieval period. Not everything in the Bible should be interpreted symbolically. But where a symbol is deliberately used in the OT context, then we can move from that symbol to see it a type conveying messages about Christ and his Second Coming. For example, the tabernacle is a symbol of God’s presence, and that becomes a type (or model) of how Jesus came down to earth to (literally) tabernacle with us (John 1:14). The temple was a symbol of God’s ruling, holy, merciful presence in the midst of his people, and finds its fulfilment in Jesus, the true Temple who is destroyed and raised again in three days (John 2:19-22). Also the blood of Passover lamb is a symbol of redemption and through typology we are led to see Christ as our Passover slain for us (1 Cor 5:7).

4. The Way of Analogy – Israel’s situation is (often) analogous or parallel to ours in the church. We are the new Israel (Gal 6:16) on a march from promise to fulfilment.¹⁹ We face many similar temptations, troubles and helps along the way. As the living God was with them, so (even more so) Jesus, the living Saviour, is with us.

5. The Way of Longitudinal Themes – e.g., teaching about attributes of God, e.g., the presence of God – Early in the OT, God told Jacob (Gen 28:15) “I am with you.” We can follow such verse through the fuller teaching of the omnipresence of God (Ps 139) to the promise of Immanuel, God with us (Isaiah 7:14), then fulfilled in Christ (Matt 1:23) and confirmed to us even as Jesus physically leaves his disciples (Matt 28:20) but experienced fully and finally when God will dwell with us for all eternity (Revelation 21:3). Many other such themes can and should be traced through to fuller understanding in the New Testament. Christ’s role in displaying or implementing the themes of the Old Testament will thereby appear.²⁰ As Longman puts it, “The Old Testament does not simply provide proof texts of the coming Messiah. Its major themes point forward to Christ’s coming suffering and glory.”²¹

6. The Way of Contrast - some things change from the OT to the NT. The OT sometimes raises a problem to which Christ is the solution. For example, the OT raises the problem of the holiness of God and how he can relate to sinners – God is holy and judges sin – this leads to the Cross of Christ where atonement was made and God is able to be just and at the same time the justifier of those who believe in Jesus (Romans 3); and now the law, which before announced only curse and condemnation, now becomes our friend and teacher to lead us to Christ (Gal 3:24). Also we can observe concerning the OT kings that most of them failed: leader after leader “made Israel sin”. This is in contrast to Jesus who perfectly obeyed the Father. He is King Jesus who never failed, and will never fail. Again the OT food laws set Israel apart from the nations, but by way of contrast we discover that in Christ the barrier is broken down (Eph 2:14), and the food laws become obsolete (Mark 7:19). On the latter, without denying a hygiene element in the food laws, Christ brings a new day for all nations so that minor cultural distinctives should have no more place.

7. The Way of NT References: This is where the New Testament directly (or by allusion) makes use of the Old Testament. In many cases, these passages refer directly to Christ. For example Isaiah 53 is interpreted for the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:32ff. Sometimes the writer makes clear that he is quoting the OT, but sometimes not. This shows the importance of using a reference Bible. In the Aland Greek NT and some modern translations, such as the Holman Standard Christian Bible (HSCB), these references are highlighted in bold. Clearly

when we preach on such passages in the OT we should carefully study how the NT uses the OT scriptures.

So these are some of the ways that we can legitimately get from the OT to Christ. Here is another helping hand. When it is hard to see Christ in a text, we can start by being God-centred. We can ask: What does this text reflect of “God’s nature that provides the ministry of Christ; and/or human nature that requires the ministry of Christ?”²²

Thus our conclusion, based on solid hermeneutical foundations, is that it is valid to see and preach Christ through the Old Testament. In fact it is our responsibility and joy never to preach on the Old Testament (or indeed on any text or topic) as if the New Testament did not exist, or as if Jesus had never come. But let us now consider some other practical issues.

C. Problems That Hinder Us from Seeing and Preaching Christ

Here I want to approach the issue from the angle of pastoral and missiological concerns. I hope my comments will make us alert both to the things that hinder us from preaching Christ and to the things that make it imperative for us to preach Christ in a way that will make our preaching relevant in the African context.

1. PASTORAL BLINDNESS

Jesus warns us that “if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Matt 15:14). Sometimes the pastors and preachers can suffer from a blindness concerning the true condition of the flock. This can have a serious effect on our preaching.

(a) We sometimes assume that our congregation are all Christians. We assume that they already have Christ. But how many of them are genuine Christians? We have a big problem with nominalism in our churches. We need to remember that being born in a Christian family does not make a person a true Christian. We all, like Nicodemus, need to be born again (John 3:3).

(b) We sometimes assume that our congregation already know Christ. Or at least we assume that they know about Christ. But how well do people really know the Gospels (that describe Christ’s life? How much do they know of Christ’s love for people, patience with sinners, power to transform lives) and the rest of the New Testament writings that explain the meaning of his life for us today? Do our people know why Christ died? Do they know the implications of his resurrection for us today? Unless we are dealing with young people brought up in Christian homes where the parents took their responsibility seriously and unless they have come through well organised Sunday Schools, then we should not assume that our congregation have a thorough knowledge of Jesus. Thus we need to keep presenting Christ. And as we present him, and help our people to picture him (and see themselves with holy imagination as if they were standing on the edge of the crowd as he spoke or performed his miracles), so by the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus will become present with us, he will come alive to us. We believe he is alive, but too often we are not aware of him. Our people need to encounter the living Christ (by faith).

(c) We sometimes assume that true believers have no need to continue with the ABCs of the gospel, no need to keep on hearing about Jesus. But this is a big mistake. We never move beyond our need of Christ. We remain “sinners saved by grace”. The beloved disciple (John) never got tired of staying very close to Jesus. Another dear friend of Jesus (Mary) was commended for making a better choice than her hardworking sister (Martha) because she “sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said” (Luke 10:39). Like Peter (see John 21) we need a fresh encounter with the risen Christ, allowing him to ask us, “Do you love me?” One day a preacher was preparing for a service, and noticed a piece of paper addressed to him. It had been placed on the pulpit. He opened it and read these words in the form of a verse of Scripture: “Sir, we would like to see Jesus” (John 12:21). The preacher was convicted that he had not been preaching Christ as he should. And so he made a new effort to lift up Jesus. Some months later, the same preacher saw another message addressed to him, again sitting on the pulpit. Again it was a verse of Scripture: “The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord” (John 20:20).

2. “HUMAN POTENTIAL” BLINDNESS

It is very popular today to preach human potential. We can see it in the number of books that are crowding our bookshops today. How to be a millionaire; How to succeed in life; The power of positive thinking; The power within you; How to prosper and advance; How to take control of your destiny; How to overcome your enemies. This is what people want to hear (cf. 2 Tim 4:3) and so we end up busy preaching human ability, human wisdom, human powers, rather than divine ability, divine wisdom and divine power that is found in Christ alone (1 Cor 1:24). If truth be told, we are better at preaching ourselves than preaching Christ. This is what Greidanus describes as “human centred preaching.”²³ He goes on to quote Willimon who observes that “unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved.”²⁴

Paradoxically not even the extended expository method of preaching through one of the Gospels guarantees Christ-centred preaching. As Sinclair Ferguson points out, “The underlying question in many of our sermons is “Where are you to be found in this story?” (are you Martha or Mary, James and John, Peter, the grateful leper . . .?). But we fail to ask the even more important question: Where, Who and What is Jesus in this story? The truth is it is far easier to preach about Mary, Martha, James, John, or Peter than it is about Christ. It is far easier to preach even about the darkness of sin and the human heart than to preach Christ. Plus my bookshelves are groaning with literature on Mary, Martha . . . the good life, the family life, the Spirit-filled life, the parenting life, the damaged self life . . . but most of us have only a few inches of shelf space on the person and work of Christ himself. . . .Am I absolutely at my best when talking about him, or about us?”²⁵ We have to see that lack of seeing Christ, lack of preaching Christ, and lack of giving Christ his rightful place in our ministry is a serious. Without Christ taking first place in our ministry, no matter how sincere, cannot possibly be a God-pleasing ministry. It affects many areas of our church life and ministry. It affects preaching, evangelism, counselling, discipling, educational work, pastoral work, and mission work. We need Christ-centred preaching, Christ-centred counselling, Christ-centred evangelism.

3. “CHRIST PLUS” BLINDNESS

As was the case with those with Gnostic tendencies in the Colossian context, many modern ministries and sects attract members through giving the impression that they have some

secret, some “full gospel” that other churches do not have. If you ask them “What is the distinctive of your teaching?” they will reply, “Don’t worry, you will know in due course.” Paul advises the Colossians to avoid being deceived. He assures them that they have already received “the word of God in its fullness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known . . . the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:25-27, cf. 2:2-10). But with many ministries today it turns out to be a matter of preaching Christ PLUS something else. They say, OK you have Christ, but you need something MORE. The secret turns out to be some deeper / fuller experience they believe their ministry is able to dispense, perhaps speaking in tongues, breakthrough prayers, re-baptism or baptism or filling of the Spirit or Holy Ghost anointing. But in fact all we need (including the fullness we are looking for) is available in Christ. Yes, we may need a fresh awakening to the riches of Christ, a fresh filling of the Spirit, but that still comes to us from the same Christ who is already at work in us (unless we are still dead in our trespasses and sins). Christ-centred preaching will deliver us from preaching Christ PLUS.

D. Positive Pastoral Exhortations towards Preaching Christ

1. People need Christ

John Stott has said, “The main objective of preaching is to expound the Scripture so faithfully and relevantly that Jesus Christ is perceived in all his adequacy to meet human need . . . the Preacher’s purpose is more than to unveil Christ; it is to unveil him that people are drawn to him and receive him.”²⁶ And we should remember that we are not just preaching the historical Jesus, but the risen living Messiah who is still with us today. We need this Jesus in our lives. I need him in my life. You need him in your life. Jesus himself warned us, “Without me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Bryan Chapell has said) “every preacher should ask at the end of each sermon: ‘When my listeners walk out the doors of this sanctuary to perform God’s will, with whom do they walk?’ ”²⁷

2. Christianity is Christ

If “Christianity is Christ”, then if we don’t preach Christ, we are missing the heart of biblical Christianity. African theologian, John Mbiti said, “The uniqueness of Christianity is in Jesus Christ.” Indian evangelist, Sadhu Sundar Singh was brought up in a Sikh home, but was converted to Christ as a teenager. He was once asked by an agnostic professor of comparative religion what he had found in Christianity which he had not found in his old religion. ‘I have Christ’, he replied, ‘Yes, I know’, said the professor a little impatiently. ‘But what particular principle or doctrine have you found that you did not have before?’ ‘The particular thing I have found’, he replied, ‘is Christ.’²⁸ Why is it so important to preach Christ? Because there is “no other foundation” (1 Cor 3:11), no other gospel (Galatians 1), no other message, “no other name under heaven whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12), “no other way” (John 14:6). Whenever John Wesley records in his Journal his evangelist activities in England, he says something like this over and over again, “I met a crowd of people in the market and I offered them Christ.” If we don’t offer people Christ in our preaching, what really have we to offer? But if we offer Christ, then what a world of difference he brings.

3. Preaching should be distinctively Christian

In Acts 20:21 during Paul's Farewell Address to the church leaders in Ephesus, he says, "I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus." That is a summary of his message. Notice that it was a balanced message. But today many of our messages are not balanced. Keep in mind that a half-truth can function as a lie. We end up misleading our hearers and that is a very serious thing according to the Bible. If we only preach repentance toward God and not at the same time faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we have short-changed the people of God. If we preach only (moral) principles, then we have certainly short-changed them. We should not preach what can be called "synagogue sermons" or "mosque sermons." These are sermons that would be acceptable in a synagogue or a mosque. Too many of our sermons are like that. Synagogue or mosque sermons are sermons that major on repentance, but never get round to mentioning Jesus Christ. When the apostles were rejected from the synagogues, it was not for preaching the law of God, but for preaching Christ; it was not for preaching against adultery, but for preaching Christ; it was not for preaching on tithing, but for preaching Christ: it was not for preaching on prayer, but for preaching Christ. This should teach us the difference between Christian sermons and the sermons of Judaism or Islam. The latter never mention Christ (unless to attack him). Let us not make that mistake. We should remember that the law was intended to lead us to Christ (Gal 3: 24). We need balance. Not to neglect the law; not to neglect the practical moral lessons to be learned from Scripture examples and precepts. But let us not get bogged down there. The Reformers believed in the three uses of the law – to reveal sin, to lead us to Christ, and to guide our lives as Christians. We should beware of preaching that only focuses on the second use. But on the other hand, we must lament the sub-Christian nature of preaching that omits the second use. What makes Christian preaching distinctive, according to Jay Adams, "is the all-pervading presence of a saving and sanctifying Christ. Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach. . . . You must not exhort your congregation to do whatever the Bible requires of them as though they could fulfil those requirements on their own, but only as consequence of the saving power of the cross and the indwelling, sanctifying power and presence of Christ in the person of the Holy Spirit."²⁹

4. Our fallen condition should drive us to Christ

If we are preaching to fallen human beings, then it should be clear that they need Christ. One of the first things we need to do with each text is to determine what evidence it provides that the people are fallen, spiritually needy, indeed hopeless without Christ (Eph 2:12). Then we are to explain and apply Christ as the only one to deliver them out of this lost and dangerous condition. It is not enough to provide only moral behavioural guidance. Even our best works are tainted with sin before God. "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). And by neglecting the grace of God that flows from Christ, the grace of the Indwelling Christ who makes obedience possible and acceptable, we are in danger of teaching another gospel, a false gospel. Right from the Reformation, both Lutherans and the Reformed have insisted, in the words of the Second Helvetic Confession, "The Gospel is, indeed, opposed to the law. For the law works wrath and announces a curse, whereas the Gospel preaches grace and blessing." Not even the commands of God himself can give us life or the power to grow as Christians. The statutes are right and good, but I am not, Paul said in Romans 7. We have to realise that we are not saved by our own efforts, nor are we sanctified by our own efforts. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and as we began by faith, so we must also continue by faith (Gal 3:1-3). The good things we do are not the things that earn salvation or favour with God for us. Rather, we receive the finished work of Christ (appeasing divine wrath and wiping out our sins by his sacrifice on the cross), and we receive Christ himself

(together with his transforming power), and now we do the good works as a life of gratitude, as an expression of Christ in us and as an enjoyment of the victory that Christ leads us into. He has provided all we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1). We cannot win the victory in our own strength. But “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). In Christ I am able to “be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might” (Eph 6:10).³⁰

6. Remember the Jesus story in all the stories of the Bible

In the African culture there is a great appreciation for stories. And we need to use the stories of the Old Testament and the Bible as a whole. Someone has observed that the lack of stories in the Qur’an is one of its weaknesses. It tends to be boring. But as we revel in the stories of the Bible, let us make sure we show the thread of the story of redemption that reaches a climax in Christ, the pattern of how God works that is finally fulfilled in Christ. My teacher, Prof. Ed Clowney had this to say: “There are great stories in the Bible, but it is possible to know the Bible story, yet miss the Bible story . . . The Bible has a story line. It traces an unfolding drama. The story follows the history of Israel, but it does not begin there, nor does it contain what you would expect in a national history . . . If we forget the story line . . . we cut the heart of the Bible. Sunday school stories are then told as tamer version of the Sunday comics . . . David is not a brave little boy who isn’t afraid of the big bad giant. He is the Lord’s anointed . . . God chose David as a king after his own heart in order to prepare the way for David’s great Son, our Deliverer and Champion . . .”³¹

E. Pitfalls to Avoid in Preaching Christ

1. The danger of all sermons sounding the same.

When someone gets excited about preaching Christ from all of Scripture, there is a danger of all their sermons end up sounding the same (as if he were preaching the same topic every week).³² This results from taking off too soon from the Old Testament to head for the New Testament, jumping too quickly from the text to Christ. This can leave us amazed: how did he see Christ where it was not obvious? It can also leave us disappointed: why did he neglect other obvious things in the passage or topic being handled? This may leave us worshipping (Christ), but unsure of how to apply the message in practical ways to our lives. Some people use the Old Testament text simply as a spring board to re-tell the story of Jesus. The sermon may be “biblical”, but we will have missed the distinctive contribution of the particular text we are handling. There is a need to let each text speak first. So our method is important. First establish the meaning of the Old Testament text; only then look at it again in the light of the New Testament, asking how it connects with Christ, remembering that Christ is the centre of redemptive history.

Chris Wright suggests several fruitful approaches. We may take up the idea of walking through the text (e.g., the story of Abraham) (1) read through the text first with Abraham, then (2) read through the text with the first readers (the Israelites), then (3) read through the story with Jesus, and then (4) read through with yourself and us, the 21st Century readers. Another similar approach is to use the idea of going on a journey by air - taking off and landing – as if we are taking our congregation on a journey in a flying time machine. Suppose we are preaching on the book of Ruth, we might say:

- let us first land in Moab in the time of Ruth – what is happening to Ruth?

- then let us land in Bethlehem some years later – what new challenges did she face there?
- then let us land in Palestine in Jesus time – let us see how Ruth’s line reaches all the way to the Messiah (Matt 1), and how he is Redeemer like Boaz who sacrifices himself to redeem those in need.
- then let us land in modern London (or Abuja) - are we prepared to face the challenges of living for God in a hostile environment?
- then “Ladies and gentlemen, we have landed – but this is not our final destination.”

2. The danger of being satisfied with the mere mention of Christ.

It is not just a matter of drawing lines to Christ (as if we are just showing off our hermeneutical skills, as some preachers like to show off their knowledge of Hebrew and Greek). It is more important “to preach in such a way that people will be attracted to him and put their faith, trust and hope in him.”³³ Remember also that it is the full Christ that we preach (not just mentioning his name) but holding up Christ in all his sufficiency in his life, miracles, teaching, conversations, as well as the climax of his work (his suffering, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost, present reign (in heaven and in our lives), intercession, and coming again).

3. The danger of preaching what you have not experienced.

You cannot give what you do not have. So the vital question for preachers is this: Do you have Christ? Do you know him? Do you love him? As well as getting the gospel right and offering Christ (as John Wesley puts it), there is the also a personal question that we need to face up to. It is the question that Jesus put to Peter: “Do you love me?” (John 21). Could it be that, like the church at Ephesus, “you have abandoned the love you had at first” (Rev 2:4)? It is not just the unsaved, the unbelievers, who need to encounter Jesus. The Christian also needs to regularly meet with Jesus. David Day has rightly said that “the hope of the sermon lies in the authenticity of the preacher, and the authenticity of the preacher lies in the encounter with the living God.”³⁴ It is necessary that we love the Lord of the Word (as well as devoting ourselves to the Word of the Lord). Could there be some of us who still read the Bible with a veil over our eyes (2 Cor 3:14) and thus are unable to see in all the Scriptures “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). Effective preaching can only flow out of communion with God; public prayer can only flow out of private prayer; warmth of conviction can only flow out of love for Christ - making him our chief joy, delighting day and night to please him (2 Cor 5:9; Jn 5:30).

4. The danger of preaching a detached Christ.

My teacher, the late Professor Harvie M. Conn used to ask: If Christ is the answer, what are the questions? It is possible to preach a Christ who only answers western questions. Geoff Thomas says that Christ is well able to answer all the questions that any man could ask.³⁵ But the issue for preaching (and for theology) in Africa today is to make sure that we take into account all the questions that Africans are asking of Jesus. John Taylor explains that often in the history of mission, “Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions that a white man would ask.”³⁶ Diane Stinton, in her recent excellent work, *Jesus of Africa*, gives evidence that the relevance of Jesus was poorly understood initially in the African context. But she also presents evidence that gradually Africans are growing in their understanding and appreciation of Jesus. She makes an effort (as a non-African) through individual interviews

and group discussions to listen carefully to “Africans reflecting on the meaning of Jesus.”³⁷ She believes that it is important for Africans to face the question posed by Jesus: “Who do you say that I am?”³⁸ The answer must, according to Stinton, be (1) grounded in Scripture (our final authority), but will also be influenced by (2) Christian tradition of Christ, (3) questions raised by African Traditional Religions, and (4) current experiences (applications) of the living Christ in the church in Africa today. As theologians and as preachers, we need a perception of Jesus “through African eyes.”³⁹ There is a danger of preaching a detached Jesus – just a Jesus “from above” rather than appreciating the relevance of Jesus “from below”. Not that we want to deny his deity or twist him to fit into our own image or our own culture, but rather to see that he bursts out of the grave in a powerful and relevant ministry that applies (Jesus) to the down-to-earth needs of the people around us. We need to relate Jesus to Africa as the one who as the Bible tells us, in the words of a popular Christian song, ‘came down to Africa’. We need to preach a Jesus who has found Africa ‘a place to feel at home’.⁴⁰ Kwame Bediako explains it thus: “accepting Jesus as ‘our Saviour’ always involves making him at home in our spiritual universe and in terms of our religious needs.”⁴¹ This has not always been easy for Africans especially as they have heard the message of Jesus through non-African messengers. As one African put it: “How can we really belong to Jesus and not to the Canadians?”⁴² Another stumbling block has been the use of pictures of Jesus portraying him as a pale blond-haired European (which he certainly was not).

Thankfully, in spite of all obstacles, it is clear that many Africans have brought him very close into their lives as even the signboards of their businesses and slogans on their vehicles make clear. (However, to some people the practice of putting Christian labels on things could be just a nominal Christian use of word magic, like a traditional fetish, an extra insurance policy.) It is the job of preachers on a regular basis to make sure that their people understand the significance of Jesus in their lives every day of the week. Particularly we need to raise the question in our thinking and preaching, “Who is Christ to the suffering peoples of Africa?”⁴³ What really does it mean to affirm Jesus as Saviour in this context? Perhaps this helps us understand why one of the favourite hymns sung in Nigeria today is “What a friend we have in Jesus”. This hymn portrays a Jesus who is relevant, a Jesus who cares, and who comes near to us in our troubles and sorrows. Kwame Bediako points out that we also need to show that knowing Jesus means real encounter / participation in the power of the risen Christ. Christianity therefore is power, not just ideas; it is being on touch with the true source of power (cf. Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 1:18). We also need to reflect on what it means to preach Christ in the context of Islam.

CONCLUSION ON PREACHING CHRIST

As we reflect on the preaching in our churches, I hope we are convinced that it is right and necessary to preach Christ from all of Scripture. How are we going to make sure that it happens? Homileticians agree on three main types of sermon: Extended expository (longer passage or narrative); textual (one or two verses) and topical. It is very possible to preach Christ through each of these:

1. Extended expository: when handling an Old Testament passage, we must link to the New Testament context; in handling an Old Testament narrative (storying), we must always look for the links to the Jesus story.

2. Textual: it is possible to show Christ in every Scripture (if not in the verse, then in the context).

3. Topical: we should make sure we link the topic to the person and work of Christ.⁴⁴ Topical preaching is very popular in Nigeria, but the weakness of topical preaching is that it may lead to a loose connection between the topic and the Scriptures. Another potential weakness of topical preaching is that we fail to see the unity as well as the progressive nature of biblical revelation.

Therefore, my dearly loved fellow preachers, let us make sure we preach Jesus. Like John the Baptist, let us be true friends of the bridegroom (John 3:28-30) who delight in nothing other than the union of the bridegroom (Jesus) and his bride (the Church). Like Paul, let us resolve always to “preach Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:23) and in our ministry “to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

¹ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

² This includes people all the way from the heretical Marcion in the early church to more recent “Liberals” such as Harnack, Bultmann and Weatherhead, cf. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, p. 18-22, 39.

³ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, p. 34ff.

⁴ R. N. Whybray quoted by Greidanus, p. 38.

⁵ Elizabeth Achtemeier takes this stance in her book *Preaching from the Old Testament*.

Although she admits that we are linked to Israel by Jesus, according to Achtemeier we cannot hear the Christian message without the use of a New Testament text.

⁶ Greidanus, p. 44.

⁷ Greidanus, p. 45.

⁸ This was reported to me 13-02-07 during a Clergy Refresher Conference, Peace House, Gboko, Nigeria

⁹ cf. Greidanus, p. 44, bottom

¹⁰ Other important works committed to this perspective are Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All the Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003) and Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Leicester: IVP, 2000).

¹¹ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, p. (Greidanus gives those main reasons p. 25ff.)

¹² We are able to get back very close to how the early apostles and missionaries preached when we read the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It does not take long to notice that all the Gospels centre on the life and ministry of Christ with up to a third of each Gospel covering the last week of his earthly ministry (thus showing the importance of the Cross). The Gospels all reach their climax with the resurrection appearances. As Mark puts it in his superscription the main theme of their message is “the gospel about Jesus Christ” (Mk.1:1). The same Christ-centred emphasis is clear from the rest of the New Testament. At the beginning of Acts, Luke comments on his former treatise (the Gospel of Luke) where he told of what Jesus began to do and teach, implying that volume two (the book of Acts) will tell of what Jesus continues to do. In other words, the work of the apostles is the work of the living exalted Christ. Similarly the rest of the New Testament emerges in the context of the church, the body of Christ, and seeks to explain and apply the salvation offered to us in the gospel of Christ (cf. Rom.1:2-4).

¹³ J. H. Jowett, quoted by John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1982), p. 327.

¹⁴ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Christ Precious to Believers,” *New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 5 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1860), 140.

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- ¹⁵ Sidney Greidanus, p. 231.
- ¹⁶ This is a title of a useful book on the subject: Roberts, *God's Big Picture* (Leicester: IVP, 2003).
- ¹⁷ Christopher Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 2.
- ¹⁸ Wright, p. 56ff.
- ¹⁹ Greidanus quoting von Rad, p. 262.
- ²⁰ For further help on this see Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology*. Downers' Grove : InterVarsity Press, 1979.
- ²¹ Tremper Longman & Raymond Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), p. 37.
- ²² Sidney Greidanus, "Redemptive History and Preaching," *Pro Rege* 19, 2 (December 1990), 14.
- ²³ Greidanus, p. 34.
- ²⁴ William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 13, quoted by Greidanus, p. 34.
- ²⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, www.reformation21.com, November 2005, Issue 4.
- ²⁶ Willamon, quoted by Greidanus p. 325.
- ²⁷ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, quoted by Greidanus p. 276
- ²⁸ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), p. 305.
- ²⁹ Jay Adams, *Preaching With Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), p. 147.
- ³⁰ These two paragraphs were adapted from Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994)
- ³¹ E. P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1991)
- ³² I am indebted to Dr Christopher Wright for this wise observation.
- ³³ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, p. 98
- ³⁴ David Day, *A Preaching Workbook*, London: SPCK, 1998, p. 147.
- ³⁵ Geoff Thomas, in Samuel Logan, ed. *Preaching and Preachers* (Phillipsburg, PA: P& R, 1986).
- ³⁶ John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 16.
- ³⁷ Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, (Nairobi: Paulines / Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), pp. 10, 15, 279.
- ³⁸ Stinton, p. 219.
- ³⁹ Stinton, p. 16.
- ⁴⁰ Stinton, p. 16.
- ⁴¹ Kwame Bediako, cited in Stinton, p. 25.
- ⁴² Stinton, p. 44.
- ⁴³ Stinton, p. 262.
- ⁴⁴ As, for example, done so well by John Piper in *Seeing and Savouring Jesus Christ, and The Passion of Christ*) and link all other doctrinal and practical matters to the Triune God (including Christ).