

## CHRIST-CENTERED PREACHING: AN OVERVIEW

Richard L. Mayhue, Th.D.  
Research Professor of Theology Emeritus  
The Master's Seminary

*This overview offers a survey of the contemporary Christ-Centered Preaching movement (hereafter CCP), focusing on its: (1) profile, (2) proponents, and (3) alleged proofs for acceptance. Next, the unintended improprieties of this phenomenon are discussed with attention devoted to: (1) an improper use of hermeneutics, (2) an improper view of God, and (3) an improper view of Scripture. Finally, because Christ-centered preaching practiced properly reflects actual New Testament preaching examples, major New Testament emphases are explored. In conclusion, seven identifying characteristics of a biblically-directed, Christ-centered preacher are described.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Around 1985 I wrote a series of articles for a popular Christian periodical outlining proper and improper ways to interpret the Bible. One article warned against reading information into a biblical text and then drawing conclusions that were not really in the text. One example of this improper practice, called eisegesis, dealt with the Song of Solomon. I observed that, although many over the centuries concluded Christ was the Song's centerpiece, Christ was actually not to be found there. Weeks later, in the next issue, a letter to the editor scathingly rebuked me because I did not believe that Christ was to be found in every text of the Bible. That was this young pastor's initial introduction to the contemporary trend of "Christ-Centered Preaching."

Unfortunately, fielding the question "Do you believe in CCP?" is like responding to the classic manipulative question "Have you stopped beating your wife?" No matter what yes or no answer one gives, it will indict the respondent in the eyes of many. However, the issue lies not with the answers but rather with the questions. Unless they are framed with more detail, accurate yes or no answers cannot be rendered by the one being interrogated.

So let me frame the question thusly for the sake of the following discussion: "Do you believe that Christ should be preached from every text in Scripture that contains Old Testament, God-intended reference to Christ?" Of course, the answer is "Absolutely!" for any God-fearing, Bible-believing, justified-by-faith-alone Bible

expositor who desires to honor Christ and follow Paul’s unforgettable and undeniable testimony, “For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5).

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief introductory overview of CCP. This overview consists of three parts:

1. Overviewing Contemporary Practices of CCP
2. Overviewing Improper Practices of CCP
3. Overviewing Biblically-Based Practices of CCP

### **Overviewing Contemporary Practices of CCP**

There is no one style of CCP. Many variations exist; therefore, the contemporary movement cannot be considered monolithic. The thoughts that follow—Profile, Proponents, and Proofs—represent a general summary derived from multiple sources.

#### Profile

Eight frequently mentioned characteristics form a general profile of the modern CCP movement:

1. The conviction that Christ is the central theme and person of Scripture.
2. A specialized CCP hermeneutic that goes beyond the normal historical-grammatical practice of interpretation to find Christ.
3. The entire Bible is Christian Scripture with an exclusive emphasis on the theological unity of the Bible at the neglect of its diversity.
4. Christ can be found in and should be preached from every text and passage of Scripture.
5. Typological and/or allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament are permitted/encouraged, even if not validated by the New Testament.
6. A “redemptive-historical” (*heilshistorisch*) derived theological grid or trajectory is the lens through which all of Scripture is to be viewed.
7. A CCP *sensus plenior* approach to interpretation is acceptable, even required.
8. A strong emphasis on preaching Christ from the Old Testament.

### Proponents

By theological persuasion, CCP proponents with rare exception are Covenantalists. By denominational affiliation, they are usually, but not always, Presbyterian, Reformed Baptist, or Southern Baptist.

Because of their writings, the following authors/pastors are frequently thought of as representative leaders in the movement:

1. Bryan Chapell—formerly of Covenant Theological Seminary
2. Edmund Clowney—formerly of Westminster Theological Seminary
3. Graeme Goldsworthy—formerly of Moore Theological Seminary
4. Sidney Greidanus—formerly of Calvin Theological Seminary
5. James Hamilton—Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
6. Dennis Johnson—Westminster Seminary California
7. Tim Keller—Presbyterian pastor in New York City
8. David Murray—Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

### Proofs

Proponents and practitioners almost always have a high-view of God and Scripture. Therefore, they undergird their preaching emphasis with a desire to exalt Christ and to be true to Scripture. The following six Bible texts represent the usual Scriptural support that allegedly proves the validity of CCP:

And behold, two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. And they were conversing with each other about all these things which had taken place. And it came about that while they were conversing and discussing, Jesus Himself approached, and began traveling with them. But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him. And He said to them, "What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?" And they stood still, looking sad. And one of them, named Cleopas, answered and said to Him, "Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?" And He said to them, "What things?" And they said to Him, "The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him up to the sentence of death, and crucified Him. But we are hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened. But also some women among us amazed us.

When they were at the tomb early in the morning, and did not find His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels, who said that He was alive. And some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also had said; but Him they did not see.” And He said to them, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:13–27).

Now He said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations—beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:44–48).

You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me (John 5:39).

For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness (1 Cor. 1:22–23).

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified (1 Cor 2:2).

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor 4:5).

However, appropriate motives need to be accompanied by correct textual interpretations in order to consistently honor God and His Word with one’s preaching and teaching.

A quick review of direct Old Testament quotes in the New Testament (using UBS, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., GNT, 887–88 as a reference) yields some interesting facts:

1. There are 360 direct Old Testament quotes in the New Testament.
2. 24 of 39 Old Testament books are quoted in the New Testament (61.5%).
3. 87.8% of Old Testament quotes in the New Testament come from only 7 (17.9%) Old Testament books.

- Pentateuch 28.6%
- Psalms 43.9%
- Isaiah 15.3%

4. Only 12.2% of Old Testament quotes in the New Testament come from the remaining 17 (43.6%) quoted Old Testament books.

5. 15 of 39 Old Testament books are not quoted in the New Testament (38.5%).

That Christ is found in the Old Testament is not a recent discovery. That the vast majority of Old Testament quotes in the New Testament come from Moses, the Psalms, and Isaiah is not surprising either (see Luke 24:44). What is amazing is how few quotes, if any, come from 32 of 39 Old Testament books. If Christ is to be preached from every Old Testament text/passage, one would expect significantly more Old Testament quotes in the New Testament, where Christ is mentioned ca. 529 times and Jesus is used ca. 917 times.

### **Overviewing Improper Practices of CCP**

CCP practitioners employ: (1) improper use of hermeneutics, (2) improper view of God, and (3) improper view of Scripture. For the vast majority, these improprieties are unintentional, but nonetheless real. An improper use of hermeneutics leads to an improper view of God and Scripture. If one's hermeneutical practices are improper, one's interpretation and exposition will be errant.

#### **Improper Use of Hermeneutics**

This is best illustrated with an introduction written by J. I. Packer:

What is covenant theology? The straightforward, if provocative answer to that question is that it is what is nowadays called a hermeneutic—that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds.<sup>1</sup>

Packer has used a theological-construct, i.e., covenant theology, to define his hermeneutic. If one starts with a theological system from which a hermeneutic is derived, then one will always conclude with the theological system. This represents an unambiguous case of circular reasoning.

---

<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, "Introduction: On Covenant Theology," in Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, vol. 1 (1677; repr., Escondido, Calif.: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 1.

Actually, one should use the historical-grammatical approach to hermeneutics, which includes an emphasis on ‘single meaning’ and ‘authorial intent,’ to interpret individual texts whose sum defines a theological system. Neither a “redemptive-historical motif,” nor a “canonical context,” nor a “canonical *sensus plenior*” should be used to develop one’s hermeneutical approach to interpreting the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

### Improper View of God

The vast majority of CCP practitioners do this unintentionally. Their motive of exalting Christ proves honorable, but their practice of “cutting it straight” falls short (cf. 2 Tim 2:15). Scripture is exclusively theocentric in a triune sense, not limited to Christ alone. To focus on CCP is in effect to ignore or seemingly demote God the Father and God the Spirit in importance. All three members of the Godhead are to be preached, not just one in isolation from the other two. To artificially inject Christ into every text/passage makes this error.

### Improper View of Scripture

It is improper to interpret an Old Testament passage as though it is about Christ when in fact it is not. It is wrong to find types of Christ in the Old Testament that God did not intend. It is erroneous to find allegories in the Old Testament that God never intended. Daniel Block renders a straightforward, blunt assessment regarding these interpretive blunders. “It is exegetically fraudulent to try to extract from every biblical text some truth about Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Put another way—it is an error of the first order to extract an errant interpretation from an inerrant Bible. The interpreter will be ashamed before God, not approved, regardless of how honorable the intent to exalt Christ.

## Overviewing Biblically-Based Practices of CCP

### Broad Biblical Instructions

Paul pointed the Roman church to the Old Testament for perseverance and encouragement that resulted in Christian hope (Rom 15:4):

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Paul exhorted the Corinthian church with Old Testament examples (1 Cor 10:6, 11):

---

<sup>2</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1890; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950), 203–10.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Block in *Christ-Centered Preaching & Teaching*, ed. Ed Stetzer (Nashville, TN: LifeWay, 2013), 6.

Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved. . . . Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

Paul urged Timothy to preach the Old Testament for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16):

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.

### Christ in the New Testament

Of the 260 chapters comprising the New Testament, Christ is found in 251, which amounts to 96.5% of the New Testament. Christ can be found in every chapter in 23 of the 27 New Testament books.

Only 9 New Testament chapters do not refer directly to the Lord Jesus Christ:

- Acts 12, 27 (historical narratives)
- 1 Corinthians 13–14 (context of 1 Cor 12–14)
- 2 Corinthians 7 (historical reminder)
- Revelation 8–10, 18 (context of judgment)

This stands in bold contrast to the Old Testament. Christ is taught sporadically in the Old but thoroughly in the New.

### Preaching Christ in the New Testament

Not only can Christ be found throughout the New Testament; moreover, Christ was preached throughout the New Testament. For example:

1. “And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5:42).
2. “And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35).
3. “But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:20).

4. “And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. And some were saying, ‘What would this idle babbler wish to say?’ Others, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,’—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18).
5. “But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, ‘I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches’” (Acts 19:13).
6. “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past” (Rom 16:25).
7. “But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness” (1 Cor 1:23).
8. “Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor 15:12).
9. “For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us,—by me and Silvanus and Timothy—was not yes and no, but is yes in Him” (2 Cor 1:19).
10. “For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor 4:5).
11. “To reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood” (Gal 1:16).
12. “Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will.” (Phil 1:15).

#### Being a New Covenant Expositor

Three New Testament texts compare the “shadow” of truth in the Old Testament to the “substance” of truth in the New:

<b>Shadow</b>	<b>Substance</b>
Colossians 2:16-17	Colossians 2:17
Hebrews 8:4-5	Hebrews 8:6
Hebrews 10:1	Hebrews 10:1

Hebrews 8:7, 13 speaks of the Old Testament as the first covenant (cf. Heb 9:1, 15, 18; 10:9) that is now faulty and obsolete. However, Hebrews 8:8, 13; 12:24 refer to a better covenant, a new covenant which is new in time (Heb 12:24—*neos*) and new

in quality (Heb 8:8, 13; 9:5—*kainos*). The only reasonable conclusion to be reached is that Christ should be preached primarily and most frequently from the New Testament which is current in time and clear in quality because it reveals the clear substance, not the veiled shadow.

Augustine (A.D. 354–430) is frequently paraphrased as writing, “The New is in the Old contained—the Old is in the New explained.” While the general sense of this statement is true, it is noteworthy to read what Augustine actually wrote. Here are Augustine’s exact words:

This grace hid itself under a veil in the Old Testament, but it has been revealed in the New Testament according to the most perfectly ordered dispensation of the ages, forasmuch as God knew how to dispose all things. . . .by this very circumstance it might be signified that it was then the time for concealing the grace, which had to be revealed in the New Testament by the death of Christ—the rending, as it were, of the veil.<sup>4</sup>

The proper paraphrase should be, “The grace of God’s salvation in Christ is in the Old veiled, i.e., concealed, but in the New revealed, i.e., clear.” He speaks like the writer of Hebrews about the shadow, i.e., veiled truth in the Old Testament contrasted with the substance clearly revealed in the New Testament.

### Questions

Any biblical expositor must pose and answer these questions to determine from which portions of Scripture he must preach in order to be an authentic Christ-centered preacher:

1. What about Christ is better explained in the Old Testament than in the New Testament?
2. What doctrine relating to salvation, sanctification, and glorification is better explained in the Old Testament than in the New Testament?
3. Why preach a veiled view of Christ from the Old Testament when one can preach a clearly revealed Christ from the New Testament?
4. If Christ would have preached about Himself on earth after the New Testament had been written, would He have primarily preached from the Old or the New Testament?

From a biblical perspective and a logical point of view, the only reasonable conclusion to be drawn is that today’s expositor must preach Christ primarily from the New Testament.

---

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, “Anti-Pelagian Writings,” in *NPNF-1*, vol. 5, chaps. 27, 95.

### **A Final Word**

The following basic descriptions should characterize the scriptural, Christ-centered expositor:

1. He acknowledges the eternity of Christ, which extends from eternity past through time and into eternity future.
2. He avoids hermeneutical practices driven by theological constructs.
3. He employs a triune emphasis in understanding the persons of the God-head.
4. He commits to a historical-grammatical hermeneutic that emphasizes original authorial intent.
5. He treasures being a New Covenant expositor.
6. He freely uses the Old Testament in general for appropriate examples and illustrations.

When preaching Christ from the Old Testament, he primarily does so from the Pentateuch, the Psalms, and Isaiah, as did the New Testament authors.