CHRIST-CENTERED PREACHING:
REDEEMING THE EXPOSITORY SERMON

A Book Review
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Preface

Preaching is a central part of the life of the church and the history of Christianity. Preaching is the authoritative proclamation of the Word of God. The assumption that preaching should be from the Word of God is not negotiable therefore true preaching is derived from the text of Scripture. However, even among those that agree that preaching should be derived from Scripture and the text should be what is expounded upon or expounded, there are many opinions and approaches to the expository sermon. In his book, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, Bryan Chappell seeks to clarify what expository preaching is and what it should do. Chappell is responding to those who claim they preach expository sermons, but do not offer explanation through illustration and fail to apply the passage to the contemporary hearer. Many such sermons are preached from Scripture and deal with the text, but they do not involve the modern listener. They do not help the listener understand how that text applies to real life. Therefore, it falls short of true expository preaching. Chappell speaks in this regard:

> We pray that God will also use our preaching to produce such a knowledge of God’s will that others will live to please him and will produce spiritual fruit, resulting in an ever growing knowledge of their God. These priorities indicate that the goal of preaching is not merely to impart information but to provide the means of transformation ordained by a sovereign God that will affect the lives and destinies of eternal souls committed to the preacher’s spiritual care (25).

Therefore, he desires to see the idea of expository preaching redeemed to its original aim: the transformation of the hearer. This review will seek to interact with insightful material given by Chapell and close with a recommendation for the book.
Principles for Expository Preaching

In this first major section of the book there are two significant insights that should be discussed: the Effectiveness of Testimony and the Fallen Condition Focus. In regards to the testimony of the preacher, Chapell reminds the reader that it is important for the preacher to believe and seek to live what he is preaching. He uses a quote from John Shaw to make his point:

It’s true as one observes, God can work by what means He will; by a scandalous, domineering, self-seeking preacher, but it is not His usual way. Foxes and wolves are not nature’s instrument to generate sheep. Whoever knew much good done to souls by any pastors but such as preached and lived in the power of love, working by a clear, convincing light, and both managed by a holy, lively seriousness? You must bring a fire to kindle a fire (34).

Chapell points out the importance of logos, the verbal content of the message, and pathos, the emotive features of the message, but he emphasizes the supreme importance of the preacher’s moral character or ethos. This is again emphasized in the following quote:

The influence of a preacher’s testimony on the acceptance of a sermon requires that one’s life be under the rule of Scripture. With unblinking candor John Wesley once explained to a struggling protégé why his ministry lacked power: “You temper in uneven; you lack love for your neighbors. You grow angry too easily; your tongue is too sharp – thus, the people will not hear you.” Wesley’s honesty reflects Scripture’s admonition and challenges each of us to guard our character if we desire effectiveness with the Word.

I believe this aspect of preaching is often disregarded by preacher and hearer. Chapell’s reminder is sobering and important for those that would desire effective ministry.

Fallen Condition Focus

In considering the obligations of a sermon, Chapell discusses the unity, purpose and application as necessities of all sermons. I found his discussion on the purpose of a sermon very enlightening. In the section he poses the following key concept: The Fallen Condition Focus (FCF) reveals a text’s and a sermon’s purpose (48). Chapel explains:
We do not fully understand the subject until we have also determined its purpose. It is too easy to preach on a doctrinal topic or an exegetical insight without considering the spiritual burden of the text for real people in the daily struggles of life. In doing so, preachers relieve themselves of having to deal with the messiness and pain of human existence. The greater intellectual and spiritual task is to discern the human concern that caused the Holy Spirit to inspire this aspect of Scripture so that God would be properly glorified in his people (48).

Chapell further defines the FCF, “The Fallen Condition Focus is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God’s people to glorify and enjoy him” (50). I believe the concept of the FCF is very helpful in preaching with purpose and learning how to apply God’s Word safely to the hearers.

**Preparation of Expository Sermons**

In this second major portion of the book, Chapell guidelines the process by which sermons are prepared. Much of this information is helpful; however, we will focus on two particulars: illustration and application. I appreciated Chapell’s approach to illustrating in sermons and believe that many preachers that are seeking to be expositional miss the opportunity to help their listeners by using illustrations. Chapell agrees:

But I discovered while pastoring that the mind yearns for and needs the concrete to anchor the abstract. This does not mean that illustration should be merely a cognitive crutch or a supplement to sound exposition. Rather, illustrations exegete Scripture in terms of the human condition, created whole-person understanding of God’s Word. Illustrations are essential to effective exposition not merely because they easily stimulate interest but also because they expand and deepen understanding of a text (178).

Preachers that refuse to illustrate not only sound boring but they are missing an important opportunity to teach God’s Word more effectively. In addition, there are other significant reasons given to illustrate. As preachers, we compete with the visual nature of the society we live in. The fact the average high graduate has seen “350,000 commercials by the time they graduate” is staggering (181). This figure alone communicates the need for growth and hard work in making
our preaching more visual. Lastly, Chapell gives some instructions upon “how to illustrate”. In this case, I appreciated his challenge to make up our own illustrations (191). Too many preachers have lifted from the internet an illustration, without even tailoring it to their message. They simply tag it to the end or somewhere and are satisfied that they have an illustration. We must remember that in all things, including preaching, hard work pays off in the end. May God help us become better illustrators of his Word.

Application

The importance of application in preaching is proclaimed loud and clear for the reader. Regarding application the author writes:

Application fulfills the obligations of exposition. Application is the present personal consequence of scriptural truth. Without application, a preacher has no reason to preach, because truth without actual or potential application fulfills no redemptive purpose. This means that at its heart, preaching is not merely the proclamation of truth but truth applied (210).

I agree with Chapell completely that a true sermon from God’s Word must include application. In addition to the reminder for the need of application in sermons, Chapell’s components of application were very helpful. He states that application must answer four key questions: “What does God now require me to do? Where does he require it of me? Why must I do what he requires? How can I do what God requires?” (214). It is important when preaching application that we are clear and specific in what and where. Why is preached to motivate the hearer to do what God requires for the correct reason. How is the enablement to do what God requires. It is important for the hearer to understand that application will be enabled by the Spirit of God and cannot be done in the flesh alone. Chapell writes concerning enablement, “The power to do what God requires resides in God. Responsible preaching does not tell people their responsibilities without also informing them of how to plug in to this power” (221). Application is the purpose
for which sermons are preached and Chapell is faithful to the Word of God in emphasizing this important aspect of preaching.

**A Redemptive Approach to Preaching**

In the last major section of the book, Chapell engages in what has been a fairly controversial area in Christian preaching, especially regarding those that espouse expository preaching. It concerns preaching Jesus Christ from Scripture. I appreciated his advancement of biblical theology in helping us preach in a redemptive manner:

The branch of Bible study devoted to examining Scripture in light of the overarching themes that unite all its particulars is called biblical theology. The insights of biblical theology are as critical for preachers who want to expound a text as are the contributions of all other features of exegesis. The intent of all the dimensions of exegetical study, including biblical theology, should be to enable preachers to convey the meaning of a specific passage in a way that is consistent with the gospel message of all Scripture (275).

The careful preacher must preach the text within the larger frame of redemption without disregarding its immediate context. He adds, “Christ-centered preaching rightly understood does not seek to discover where Christ is mentioned in every text but to disclose where every text stands in relation to Christ” (279). An understanding of this distinction will keep preachers from undermining the authorial intent of passages when they are preaching because it clarifies the mission. In addition to the previous important lesson, Chapell warns against moralistic preaching that preaches, “Be like, be good, or be disciplined” without being clear about the motivation and empowerment needed to honor God. We must understand the effects of grace in the life of a believer and preach accordingly. Chapell writes:

Commanding people to do what is right without explaining why or how inevitably hurts them because they are left to consider their works and abilities as the cause of God’s acceptance or affection . . . Healing of the soul begins with the message that God graciously accepts our works offered unto him in the love and thanksgiving that result from apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ. Our acceptance and our ongoing sanctification are never a result of anything but grace. Christians cannot gain or earn any more of God’s love because grace has already granted and secured all the love there is to have (318-319).
Chapell is right on when he speaks of the importance of grace in redemptive preaching. It is impossible to preach Christ and works and it is important for us to respect the original context of the passage as well as the place that passage fills in the larger plan of redemptive history.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this book offers a very sound approach to preaching. The foundations of preaching that are employed by Chapell are time tested. However, he does lend a fresh perspective in some areas, such as the discovery of purpose as explained in the Fallen Condition Focus. His emphasis on illustration and application are much needed in today’s preaching and his practical approach will be helpful to all who read it. Lastly, Chapell’s reminder and clarification on how to preach redemptive messages has been helpful for me as I prepare sermons regularly. In closing, I would highly recommend this book for the serious-minded pastor that desires to grow in his ability to shepherd the flock by preaching the Word of God.