A Redemptive Approach to Preaching

Reviewing the Fallen Condition Focus

Why does the development of expository sermons depend on the clear identification of a Fallen Condition Focus? To this point, the most obvious answer relates to homiletical structure. A clear FCF provides a sermon with a distinct aim so that a preacher can organize an entire message to address a unified purpose. An FCF not only targets the information in a sermon but also directs a preacher to relevant application supported by the particular text. Beyond these standard homiletical goals, however, there are theological reasons for preparing sermons directed toward a passage’s FCF.

Grounding the Fallen Condition Focus

The theological basis for designing messages with an FCF derives from a principle evident in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, a touchstone verse for all biblical preaching. As already observed (see chap. 2), the fact that “all Scripture is God-breathed . . . so that the man of God may be
thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17) necessarily implies that even the most gifted and good persons remain spiritually incomplete apart from God’s revelation (cf. Col. 2:9–10). God uses His Word to make us what we could not be on our own. In this sense, God’s Word acts as an instrument of his redeeming work. Scripture continually aims to restore aspects of our brokenness to spiritual wholeness so that we might reflect and rejoice in God’s glory. Our condition as fallen creatures in a fallen world requires this redemptive work not merely for the initial work of salvation but also for our continuing sanctification and hope (Rom. 15:4). Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Thus, all Scripture—and by corollary, all expository preaching that unfolds its meaning—focuses on an aspect of our fallen condition that requires and displays God’s provision. Preaching that remains true to this God-glorifying purpose specifies an FCF indicated by a text and addresses this aspect of our fallenness with the grace revealed by the text.

As already discussed, a preacher determines an FCF for an expository message by asking the following three questions: (1) What does the text say? (2) What concern(s) did the text address in its context? (3) What do listeners share in common with those to (or about) whom the text was written? Expository preachers are ready to prepare a sermon only after they have identified a fallen condition shared by those in the biblical context and those in the contemporary context. This premise is derived from the understanding that God intended the Bible to serve both an original purpose and a present use. These are not separate purposes. The original intent reveals proper present use by highlighting a common aspect of the human condition that is addressed by the scriptural truths of the text.

Scripture itself teaches that determining what is biblically meaningful for us hinges on identifying an original FCF that is applicable for present purposes. Using an Old Testament passage in this way, the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians of the New Testament:

> It is written in the Law of Moses: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?
> 1 Corinthians 9:9–11, emphasis added

Moses wrote for his own situation, but Paul recognized that proper understanding of original concerns (i.e., insensitive greed should not drive God’s people to deprive even oxen of a share in the product of their labor) had implications for God’s people in a much later time. Paul even wrote that Moses “says this for us” and “this was written for us.” Through the Old Testament passage, Paul taught that New Testament believers should not be so concerned about their own gain that they do not provide for the ministers who labor to feed the churches with God’s Word.

Over and over again the apostle used the Old Testament in this freshly applied way. In the next chapter of the same letter to the Corinthians, he alluded to the devastations that came on ancient Israel when it yielded to temptation in order to command certain behaviors of New Testament believers who were similarly tempted:

> Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on
evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were. . . . We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did. . . . We should not test the Lord, as some of them did. . . . And do not grumble, as some of them did. . . . These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us.

1 Corinthians 10:6–11

1. Until we have determined its FCF, we do not really know what a text is about even if we know many true facts about it.
2. We should never preach on a passage until we have determined an FCF the Holy Spirit intended the passage to address.

In the apostle’s mind—and in the Spirit’s plan—the initial intent of the record made in a previous millennium provided definite guidance for present practices.

But original purposes did not merely provide behavioral instruction. They were also signposts to faith. For those people who might be tempted to believe that their salvation depended on their works, Paul also wrote, “The words ‘it was credited to him’ [i.e., Abraham] were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (Rom. 4:23–24). Paul recognized that identifying the concern that a passage originally addressed was the key to applying its truths to present needs of faith as well as behavior.

Every passage was written to bring glory to God by addressing some aspect(s) of our fallen condition (affecting faith and/or practice with divine provision). By correction, warning, diagnosis, and/or healing of this fallenness, a text reveals God’s means for enabling his people to glorify him and to know his grace both in the passage’s original context and in the present situation. This realization of the underlying spiritual design of all Scripture underscores priorities discussed in earlier chapters of this book:

Expository preachers must ask, “What is an FCF behind the inspiration of this text?” before they can accurately expound its meaning. They must determine the target the Holy Spirit intended to strike in order to aim their exposition of the text accurately. Thus, identifying a current need that listeners share with those in the biblical situation that required the inspired writing is prerequisite for every expository sermon.

**Incorporating the Fallen Condition Focus**

The approaches to expository preaching proposed in this book have already prepared you to incorporate an FCF into your exposition. We have developed each element of a sermon to support the principles of an FCF. The unifying theme of a sermon—the one thing that a message is about—is how the truths of a passage address an FCF. The introduction of a message identifies this FCF by revealing the reason the truths of the passage were inspired in the biblical context and the reason they are needed in the present situation. The introduction also prepares for the proposition, which formally states how the preacher will present the truths of the passage in light of
Deciphering the Redemptive Signals

Thus far we have emphasized the negative—focusing the development of a sermon on the mutual problem or burden that both original and present targets of the text share. There is, however, a necessary and welcome reverse. Why does all Scripture reveal an aspect of our fallen condition? The clear answer is: to supply the warrant for (and to define) the character of the redemptive elements in Scripture that we can, in turn, apply to our fallenness. The Bible’s ultimate aim is beautifully positive. Scripture addresses features of our incompleteness only because such a focus concurrently signals the work of God that makes us whole. The goal of expository preaching is to decipher these redemptive signals so that listeners understand a text’s full meaning in the context of its God-glorifying, gospel intent.

Sub-Christian Messages in Preaching

Unless we identify the redemptive purposes of a text, it is possible to say all the right words and yet send all the wrong signals. I witness this miscommunication almost daily as the top-rated radio station in our city broadcasts a “meditation” during the early morning. In each meditation, the preacher addresses a topic with a Bible verse or two. The subjects run the gamut from procrastination to care for children to honesty on the job. The station turns up the reverberation during the inspirational minute so that it sounds as though the words come directly from Mount Sinai. Not to pay attention seems like a sin. As the speaker reminds us to practice punctuality, good parenting, and business propriety, I imagine thousands of listening
Christians are nodding their heads and saying in unison, “That’s right . . . that’s how we should live.”

I have played tapes of these meditations to seminary classes and asked if anyone can discern error. Rarely does anyone spot a problem. The speaker quotes from the Bible accurately, he advocates moral causes, and he encourages loving behaviors. Thus, students are usually astonished when I point out that the radio preacher is not a Christian. He actually represents a large cult located in our region.

How can this be? How can so many Christians (even those well informed) readily grant assent to one whose commitments are radically anti-Christian? Some answer that their lack of protest results from the radio preacher’s care to avoid saying anything controversial. They contend that he hides his heresy beneath a veil of right-sounding orthodoxy. Such defenses miss the point, even as his proponents have missed the problem. The radio speaker has not hidden his heresy; he exposes it every time he speaks by what is missing from his message. The more significant problem is that evangelical preachers inadvertently and frequently present such similar messages that Christians fail to hear the difference between a message that purports to be biblical and one that actually is.

A message that merely advocates morality and compassion remains sub-Christian even if the preacher can prove that the Bible demands such behaviors. By ignoring the sinfulness of humankind, which makes even our best works tainted before God (Isa. 64:6; Luke 17:10), and by neglecting the grace of God, which makes obedience possible and acceptable (1 Cor. 15:10; Eph. 2:8–9), such messages necessarily subvert the Christian message. Christian preachers often do not recognize this counter-gospel impact of their preaching because they are simply recounting a behavior clearly specified in the portion of the text in front of them. But a message that even inadvertently teaches others that their works merit God’s acceptance inevitably leads people away from the gospel. By themselves, moral maxims and advocacy of ethical conduct fall short of the requirements of biblical preaching. Jay Adams explains with impassioned eloquence:

If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the member of a Jewish synagogue or to a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it. Preaching, when truly Christian, is distinctive. And what makes it distinctive is the all-pervading presence of a saving and sanctifying Christ. Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach. That is just as true of edification as it is of evangelistic preaching.

. . . Edificational preaching must always be evangelistic; that is what makes it moral rather than moralistic, and what causes it to be unacceptable in a synagogue, mosque, or to a Unitarian congregation. By evangelical, I mean that the import of Christ’s death and resurrection—His substitutionary, penal death and bodily resurrection—on the subject under consideration is made clear in the sermon. You must not exhort your congregation to do whatever the Bible requires of them as though they could fulfill those requirements on their own, but only as a consequence of the saving power of the cross and the indwelling, sanctifying power and presence of Christ, in the person of the Holy Spirit. All edificational preaching, to be Christian, must fully take into consideration God’s grace in salvation and in sanctification.

A textually accurate discussion of biblical commands does not guarantee Christian orthodoxy. Exhortations for moral behavior apart from the work of the Savior degenerate into mere Pharisaism, even if preachers advocate the actions with selected biblical evidence and good intent. Spirituality based on personal conduct cannot escape its
human-centered orbit though it aspires to lift one to the divine.

A Biblical Theology for Preaching

But how do expository preachers infuse the redemptive essentials (i.e., Christ-centeredness) into every sermon without superimposing ideas foreign to many texts? Many Old Testament passages make no explicit reference to Christ’s “substitutionary, penal death and bodily resurrection.” New Testament texts abound that commend moral behaviors with no mention of the cross, the resurrection, the Holy Spirit, or God’s enabling grace. Can we really be expositors and bring out of a text what it does not seem to mention? The answer lies in an axiom mentioned earlier: Context is part of text.

No text exists in isolation from other texts or from the overarching biblical message. Just as historico-grammatical exegesis requires a preacher to consider a text’s terms in context, correct theological interpretation requires an expositor to discern how a text’s ideas function in the wider biblical message. Some meanings we discern by taking out our exegetical magnifying glass and studying a text’s particulars in close detail. Other meanings we discern by examining a text with a theological fish-eye lens to see how the immediate text relates to texts, messages, events, and developments around it. Accurate expositors use both a magnifying glass and a fish-eye lens, knowing that a magnifying glass can unravel mysteries in a raindrop but can fail to expose a storm gathering on the horizon.

The branch of Bible study devoted to examining Scripture in the 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.

In the introduction to his seminal volume on biblical theology, Geerhardus Vos outlined the keys that will keep preaching on track. He began with the simple observation that “revelation is a noun of action relating to divine activity.” All scriptural revelation discloses God. In its proper context, every verse in the Bible in some sense points to his nature and work. Yet because God is God, no single verse, no single passage, no single book contains all we need to know about him. In fact, if God totally revealed himself to our earliest faith ancestors, they would not have had the theological background or the biblical preparation necessary to take in all that God has since disclosed to humankind about himself. For this reason, God’s revelation through biblical history is progressive. This does not mean that early revelation differs from or in any sense contradicts what God ultimately reveals. Says Vos, “The progressive process is organic: revelation may be in seed form which yields later full growth accounting for diversity but not true difference because the earlier aspects of the truth are indispensable for understanding the true meanings of the later forms and vice versa.” God uses each verse, each recorded event, and each passing epoch of biblical history to build a single, comprehensive understanding of who he is. Even though an aspect of God’s revelation may not be in full bloom in some portion of Scrip-
ture, that does not mean that the truth is absent in seed form.

Our understanding of who God is remains inextricably bound to what he has done. Writes Vos, “Revelation is inseparably linked to the activity of redemption. . . . Revelation is the interpretation of redemption.” This means that for us to expound biblical revelation from any passage, we must relate its explanation to the redeeming work of God present there. The redemptive dimension of a particular Scripture passage may not seem to dominate the text’s landscape because the redemptive features of a passage sometimes appear only in seed form. Still, exposing the revelation properly requires understanding a passage’s redemptive content and context.

We must relate even seed-form aspects of a text to the mature message they signal or for which they prepare us in order to interpret fully and rightly what the passage means. You do not explain what an acorn is, even if you say many true things about it (e.g., it is brown, has a cap, is found on the ground, is gathered by squirrels), if you do not in some way relate it to an oak tree. In a similar sense, preachers cannot properly explain a seed (or portion) of biblical revelation, even if they say many true things about it, unless they relate it to the redeeming work of God that all Scripture ultimately purposes to disclose. In this sense, the entire Bible is Christ-centered because his redemptive work in all of its incarnational, atoning, rising, interceding, and reigning dimensions is the capstone of all of God’s revelation of his dealings with his people. Thus, no aspect of revelation can be thoroughly understood or explained in isolation from some aspect of Christ’s redeeming work.

**A Biblical Focus for Preaching**

All Scripture is redemptive revelation that is inspired to address humanity’s fallen condition (or incompleteness) with divine provision. Preachers who recognize this pervasive scriptural dynamic have discovered the means for uncovering the positive focus in all Christ-centered preaching. The discovery occurs when they see that a text’s FCF defines God’s mercy at the same time that it reveals human need.

When I was a child, my mother spent an afternoon making a special chocolate pudding for our family of eight. When she brought the fabulous dessert to the dinner table, however, the impact was marred by the deep imprint of a child’s finger in the middle of the bowl. Someone had sneaked an early taste. My mother asked, “Who?” No one fessed up, but that did not stop my mother’s investigation. She simply began matching the index finger of the six children to the hole in the top of the pudding until she found the digit that fit (it wasn’t mine). The impression not only revealed the pudding’s incompleteness but also identified the one who could fill the hole. God’s imprinting of our incompleteness on a passage of Scripture does not merely demonstrate an aspect of our fallenness; it also reveals the nature and the character of the One who can make us whole.

Although every biblical passage addresses an FCF, no text tells us what we can do to complete ourselves or to make ourselves acceptable to God (by our actions), for then we would not be truly fallen. No passage tells us how to make ourselves holy (as though we could
achieve divine status by our own efforts). The Bible is not a self-help book. Scripture presents one, consistent, organic message. It tells us how we must seek Christ, who alone is our Savior and source of strength, to be and do what God requires. To preach what people should be and do and yet not mention him who enables their accomplishment warps the biblical message. God's redemptive work is integral to every biblical passage's proper exposition. Thomas Jones writes:

True Christian preaching must center on the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross is the central doctrine of the holy scriptures. All other revealed truths either find their fulfillment in the cross or are necessarily founded upon it. Therefore, no doctrine of Scripture may faithfully be set before men unless it is displayed in its relationship to the cross. The one who is called to preach, therefore, must preach Christ because there is no other message from God.10

These words are not hyperbole but rather reflect the ethic of the apostle Paul, who wrote to the Corinthians, "As I proclaimed to you the testimony about God . . . I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1–2). Paul echoed this ethic many times:

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

1 Corinthians 1:22–24

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

2 Corinthians 4:4–5

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Galatians 6:14

Paul's commitment to make his ministry reflect "nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified" may strike us as not only infeasible but also not genuine. After all, we could reason that Paul addressed church worship standards, biblical discipline, stewardship, family relationships, governmental responsibilities, and the history of Israel. He even quoted Greek poets. Doesn't this prove that the apostle did more than talk about Jesus and the crucifixion? Apparently not to Paul. In Paul's mind, every subject, every address, and every epistle had a focus. Everything he did centered on making the cross and its implications evident. In this sense, the "cross" reference functions as synecdoche, representing the entire matrix of God's redemptive work past, present, and future, including the resurrection, advocacy, and reign his victory through the cross provides.11

Sidney Greidanus explains the redemptive scope of the cross in Christ-centered preaching:

Even the seemingly limited focus found in 1 Corinthians 2:2 of Paul knowing "nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" may contain a much broader perspective. John Knox helpfully explains, "At first sight this last phrase ['and him crucified'] seems to leave out the Resurrection entirely. But it seems to do so only because we suppose Paul's thought was moving, as ours customarily does, in a forward direction . . . But when Paul wrote the phrase, he was thinking first of all of the risen, exalted Christ and his thought moved backward to the cross . . . Thus, far from
omitting reference to the Resurrection, Paul's phrase takes its start from it; the word Christ means primarily the one now known as the living and present Lord."^{12}

In this sense, though the apostle addressed many topics and drew from many sources, the panorama of subjects was displayed only to reveal the Redeemer's work on the cross in richer detail. Christ-centered preaching (whether it is referred to as preaching the cross, the message of grace, the gospel, God's redemption, or a host of similar terms) reflects Paul's intention to preach nothing "except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Just as Paul's preaching involved more than the message of the incarnation and atonement—and yet kept all subjects in proper relation to God's redemption through Christ—so also 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. The grace of God unfolding in the person and work of Jesus unfolds in many dimensions throughout the pages of Scripture. The goal of the preacher is not to find novel ways of identifying Christ in every text (or naming Jesus in every sermon) but to show how each text manifests God's grace in order to prepare and enable his people to embrace the hope provided by Christ.

This apostolic ethic of maintaining a Christocentric perspective when preaching reflects the principles of exposition that the Savior himself revealed. Jesus propositionally stated the redemptive focus of all Scripture when he walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. There, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27; cf. John 5:39, 46). Jesus said that all Scripture is about him. This does not mean that every phrase, punctuation mark, or verse directly reveals Christ but rather that all passages in their context disclose his nature and/or necessity. Such an understanding compels us to recognize that failure to relate a passage's explanation to an aspect of Christ's person or work is to neglect saying the very thing that Jesus said the passage is about. Jesus said the passage is about him. If this is so, then we cannot faithfully expound any text without demonstrating its relation to him.

What Jesus verbally said on the road to Emmaus he visually displayed on the mount of transfiguration. When the archetypal representatives of the Old Testament law and prophets, Moses and Elijah, appeared with Jesus near the culmination of his earthly ministry (Matt. 17), they testified that all preceding Scripture directs the believer's gaze to this One. Thus, the testimony of Scripture encircles Jesus.^{13} The law and the prophets that precede and the apostolic ministry that follows the work of the cross make Jesus their center. Prophets, apostles, and the Savior testify that all Scripture ultimately focuses on the Redeemer. How then can we rightly expound them and not speak of him? Expository preaching is Christ-centered preaching.

**Expounding the Redemptive Message**

Assenting to the redemptive focus of all Scripture is often far easier than disclosing it. How one gets redemptive truth out of a text and into a sermon can stretch both exegetical and preaching skills. Commitment to the insights of biblical theology requires a homiletical
methodology that grants preachers and listeners access to the re-
demptive truths each passage contains. The next chapter deals with
this methodology in greater detail, but it is appropriate at this junc-
ture to identify some errant paths and to point in the directions that
lead to faithful exposition of a text.

**Topical and Textual Approaches**

A topical sermon may allow a preacher to add redemptive truth to
a message because the preacher is not bound to disclose the precise
meaning of a specific text in such a message. The much repeated
line of Charles Spurgeon that "no matter where he began in Scrip-
ture, he always took a shortcut to the cross" exemplifies a method
that bypasses the direct statements in a text. This is not to say that a
topical sermon necessarily leads to unbiblical conclusions or to inap-
propriate redemptive connections. Such an approach simply pro-
gresses without clear biblical authority.

The same authority vacuum exists for textual sermons that include
redemptive truth through analogy, illustration, or addition. An analo-
gy or illustration may well bring to mind an aspect of the redeeming
work of God, which gives entry to a redemptive focus. Unfortunately,
the redemptive focus results from a preacher's words rather than from
the Word. Devising a redemptive focus by adding material not
exeged from a text invites homiletical moves and conceptual devel-
opments without clear biblical warrant. Several years ago I heard a
well-known preacher deliver a sermon on the subject of procrastina-
tion. In each phase of the message, he told us why the Bible requires
us to "make the best use of the Lord's time." The message then end-
ed with an altar call. No mention of the redeeming work of Christ,
no development of the necessity of the atonement, no scriptural in-
struction on the need of salvation preceded the call to come forward.
In the call itself, the preacher explained the essence of the gospel,
but this explanation had no origin in or connection to the text before
us. The redemptive truths were simply added to the message—not
developed out of the text.

**Expository Approaches**

Expository preaching will not allow a preacher to add material to a
text in order to derive a redemptive focus. An expositor develops the
message of a sermon out of the material in a particular text. How,
then, can expositors always uncover a redemptive focus that remains
fair to the text?

**Text Disclosure**

A text may make a direct reference to Christ or to an aspect of his
messianic work. Specific mention of Jesus or his saving activity may
occur in a Gospel account, a messianic psalm, an epistle's develop-
ment, or a prophetic utterance. In such cases, the task of the exposit-
or is plain: Explain the reference in terms of the redemptive activity
it reveals. A preacher who does not see redemptive work in an ac-
count of Christ's exorcism of a demon, a scene from the crucifixion,
or a prophecy of the Savior's dominion over the world cannot proper-
ly expound the text. When features of God's plan to defeat Satan and
restore spiritual wholeness reside on the plain face of a text, a preacher places the passage in proper redemptive context simply by presenting its contents accurately. But, though many biblical passages specifically mention Christ’s person and work, many more do not. What other alternatives may preachers pursue to stay Christ-centered in their preaching?

**Type Disclosure**

God’s redemptive work in Christ may also be evident in Old Testament types. Typology as it relates to Christ’s person and work is the study of the correspondences between persons, events, and institutions that first appear in the Old Testament and preview, prepare, or more fully express New Testament salvation truths. Debates have swirled through the centuries over what constitutes a legitimate type and what merely reflects an interpreter’s overactive imagination. Current research into literary methods and structures promises to aid our understanding of biblical typology, but where New Testament writers specifically cite or unmistakably echo how an Old Testament person or feature prefigures the person and work of Christ—as with Adam, David, Melchizedek, the Passover, and the temple—a preacher may safely use typological exposition.

Types allow a preacher to approach appropriate Old Testament passages with a biblically certified pre-understanding of their redemptive connotations. These connotations may not be apparent if the texts are examined without the New Testament information. On the basis of this inspired input, explanations of such passages remain incomplete if a preacher does not take into consideration what the Bible itself reveals about a text’s ultimate purposes. Of course, this does not mean that every time an Old Testament passage contains a type, a preacher must identify it as such. Where typology exists, however, it may prove to be a profitable avenue for redemptive exposition, particularly when other alternatives seem remote.

**Context Disclosure**

Texts that specifically mention Jesus or reveal him typologically are few relative to the thousands of passages that contain no direct reference to Christ. How can a preacher remain Christ-centered and expository when dealing with these apparently Christ-silent texts? When neither text nor type discloses the Savior’s work, a preacher must rely on context to develop the redemptive focus of a message.

By identifying where a passage fits in the overall revelation of God’s redemptive plan, a preacher relates the text to Christ by performing the standard and necessary exegetical task of establishing its context. Preachers concerned about Christ-centeredness recognize that their exegetical method has necessary implications for their theological conclusions if they are to deal consistently with Scripture. In its context, every passage possesses one or more of four redemptive foci. The text may be:

- predictive of the work of Christ
- preparatory for the work of Christ
- reflective of the work of Christ and/or
- resultant of the work of Christ
These categories do not exhaust the possibilities of how texts may reveal the redemptive work of God, but they do provide dependable means of exploration and explanation.

*Predictive.* Some passages *predict* God’s redemptive work in Christ by making specific mention of his coming person or work. Messianic psalms and passages from prophetic and apocalyptic literature provide many examples. A sermon from Isaiah 40 that offers comfort to God’s people without mention of Christ’s coming plainly misses the future source of comfort the passage identifies in its context.

Other texts reveal what Christ will do or be without making specific reference to him. Examples include those passages relating to the Old Testament sacraments, the exodus, the purification codes, and so on. The predictive nature of these passages may be apparent only in New Testament light, and the expositor assumes an unnecessary and inappropriate blindness when attempting to handle such texts without this illumination. We are New Testament believers and have both the right and the responsibility to view God’s earlier revelations from the full perspective that his Word grants us. Interpreting Old Testament passages without considering how their features anticipate Christ’s coming actually diminishes reverence for the organic nature of Scripture. 19

*Preparatory.* The inspired intention of some texts that make no specific mention of Jesus is to *prepare* the people of God to understand aspects of the person and/or work of Christ. When Paul writes to the Galatians that the purpose of the Mosaic law was to lead the people of God to Christ, we not only learn why God provided the commands (3:24) but also understand why a sermon that only exhorts believers not to steal is incomplete. As was every tenet of the law, the eighth commandment was more than a moral standard. It was also a theological lens picturing the frailty of the soul. 20

Old Testament believers were to understand their need of faith in the Redeemer based on their inability to keep any divine imperative perfectly (Gal. 2:15–21). Exposition on the law that fails to make this point advances an implicit legalism and misses the explanation that the Bible itself offers for God’s commands. 21 People today must understand that neither a sophisticated understanding of a commandment nor the most vigorous attempts to heed it will merit grace. Comprehensive explanation of what God requires falls short of adequate exposition if it fails to say why God set the standard.

God prepared for Christ’s work by planting the perception of need in the hearts of Old Testament saints. He also prepared them (and us) by helping them to understand how the need would be satisfied. Paul wrote of Abraham, “Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it [i.e., righteousness] was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:23–25 KJV). The apostle’s statement alerts us to the fact that imbedded in the narratives and proclamations of the Old Testament is the theology of grace. For the sake of the original as well as the present readers, God prepared a testament establishing what Christ would have to do and how his
work would apply to us. Exposition fair to this grand purpose of all Scripture excavates Old Testament texts to expose implicit spiritual, experiential, or theological preparations that enable us to embrace redemptive truths, even where there is no explicit statement of them.

Reflective. The path to implicit aspects of the gospel of grace that are imbedded in every biblical passage does not require tortuous expeditions of logic or theological safaris to remote mountains of higher learning. When a text neither plainly predicts nor prepares for the Redeemer’s work, an expositor should simply explain how the text reflects key facets of the redemptive message. This is by far the most common tool for constructing Christ-centered messages when there is no direct reference to Jesus’ person or work. A preacher who asks the following basic questions takes no inappropriate liberties with a text: What does this text reveal of God’s nature that provides redemption? What does this text reflect of human nature that requires redemption?

Without doing damage to the integrity, authority, and exegesis of a passage, these questions actually place every biblical text within a redemptive context. These questions act as natural lenses that form the spectacles that enable us to view every text redemptively. This does not mean that the lenses make the person or name of Jesus magically arise from the bushes of every biblical account. Rather, they enable us to see reflected aspects of divine character and human fallenness that provide or require the grace of God ultimately manifested in the person and work of Christ.

When we consistently ask these two interpretive questions, grace will be as naturally evident in an Old Testament command as in a New Testament promise, because both will reflect inherent dimensions of our fallen condition and of God’s eternal character that contextualize his redemptive work. Preachers should not pretend that every text specifically mentions Jesus if one has the right decoder ring. Rather, they should demonstrate how every text reflects aspects or needs of his grace that are made plain in the fullness of time. In this way, preachers demonstrate the unity of Scripture, God’s unchanging but progressive plan of redemption, and the ways that all Scripture coordinates to reveal the grace of the Savior and the futility of any other hope.²²

By asking what a text reflects of God’s nature that prompts the work of Christ, an expositor can examine any narrative, genealogy, commandment, proverb, proposition, or parable to see what it reveals of God’s justice, holiness, goodness, lovingkindness, faithfulness, provision, or deliverance. These attributes of God’s redemptive character emanate from texts that make no mention of Christ but make sense of Paul’s assessment that “everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). Because everything that was written is the self-revelation of the God whose mercy endures forever (Ps. 136) and in whom there is no shadow of turning (James 1:17), all Scripture possesses an aspect of redemptive hope.

All Scripture reveals God in either his words or his doings. The redemptive truths made evident by these means may appear in seed form or in mature form, but Scripture, by its revelatory nature, bares
these divine features for those with eyes to see. This grace may appear in a direct New Testament statement of Christ’s work through the cross and resurrection. It may also appear in Old Testament clothes woven from the fabric of the persons and events that the Holy Spirit uses to reflect the redemptive character of God, which is ultimately revealed and fulfilled in Jesus.

This theocentric nature of all Scripture should not lead us to slight the redemptive lessons that God may be presenting through the human characters in the Bible. The Creator may reveal himself in contradistinction to his creatures. We should not be surprised at the poverty of moral perfection and the absence of consistent heroics in the patriarchs, apostles, and persons who dominate the biblical accounts, because their weaknesses reveal the deep human need in even the most spiritually privileged saints. There are certainly commendable aspects of character in many biblical figures, but Scripture seems to take great care to demonstrate how deeply flawed the entire human race is so that all will acknowledge dependence on the Savior for justification, sanctification, and all spiritual blessing.

Preachers who ignore the human flaws in biblical characters out of deference to the reputation of past saints or out of a desire to hold a moral example before present believers unconsciously distract attention from the only hope of true faithfulness. By demonstrating throughout Scripture his love and his use of those who are shamefully human, God reveals himself to be a Savior of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15) and the Deliverer of those who cannot help themselves (Ps. 40:17).

Unquestionably, God uses persons in Scripture as both positive and negative models of the behaviors and commitments he requires (cf. 1 Cor. 10:5–6), but he never implies that human actions alone can procure or secure a relationship with him. Had God wished to communicate to us that our acceptance hinges on our goodness, he would have chosen another sort of person than those he most typically uses in the Bible to reveal the basis for our faith. But then he would have revealed himself to be a different kind of God. Expository preaching faithful to the intent of Scripture neither shies away from the flaws in biblical saints nor flaunts their strengths apart from the divine aid that makes the redeeming God the ultimate hero of every text.

Aspects of his redemptive character, which God presents in Scripture through his own activity or through human contradistinctions, may be specifically stated in a text or may be implied by the place of the passage in the history of redemption. Yet whether a preacher gleams these conclusions from the historical sweep of Scripture, its doctrinal statements, or God’s relational interaction with his people, the redemptive themes must be harvested lest preaching sow mere moral commentary and reap Pharisaism as its inevitable fruit.

Resultant. Scripture includes many instructions that are often mistakenly preached as conditions for divine love and acceptance. Such preaching errs not by detailing what God requires but by implying, if not directly stating, that a relationship with God is a consequence of obedience. The true gospel proclaims that obedience itself is a blessing that results from God’s love for us. The love we have for him that is engendered by deep apprehension and appreciation of his un-
conditional mercy (made available through Christ alone) stimulates our desire and efforts in obedience. Still, even this desire and ability to do what he requires is of his Spirit and is never cause for boasting before our God or for behaving as though he were in our debt (Rom. 3:27; 8:5–13; 1 John 2:16). Many passages that describe the privileges or blessings of obedience cannot be rightly interpreted without an explanation that makes them an ultimate result of what Christ has done rather than a direct result of what we do.

Divine love made conditional upon human obedience is mere legalism, even if the actions commended have biblical precedent. The only obedience approved by God is that which he himself enables and sanctifies through the union with Christ he provides. For example, my prayers in themselves cannot earn, deserve, or require God’s blessing. God will be no one’s debtor (Job 41:11). God is pleased by sincere prayers and promises to bless according to his purpose what is offered in obedience to him. However, though my prayers may be the instrument by which God blesses, the merit of my prayers is never the basis of his care. With their mix of human motives and their reflection of my own frail wisdom and resolve, my prayers could never by their own worth determine or demand a holy God’s blessing. I pray not to gain or barter my righteousness but as a result of the access to the Father that Jesus provides for me (and allows me to use) by his death, resurrection, and continuing intercession. Thus, the writer of Hebrews enjoins, “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us . . . then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (4:14, 16). God mercifully receives and honors prayer humbly offered in love to him, not because our prayers are inordinately good but because he is surpassingly gracious.

The promised blessings of prayer (as well as the opportunity for fellowship with God) encourage my obedience in offering prayer, but the acceptance of the offering is a result of Christ’s ministry and not the sufficiency of my sincerity or diligence. To segregate a Scripture promise regarding the blessings of prayer from mention of Jesus is to consign Christian prayer to the same hopeless and self-righteous folly of spinning prayer wheels and reciting incantations.

To preach matters of faith or practice without rooting their foundation or fruit in what God would do, has done, or will do through the ministry of Christ creates a human-centered (anthropocentric) faith without Christian distinctions. Truly Christian preaching must proclaim, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:1–2, emphasis added). Christ’s work unites us to him and releases us from the guilt and the power of our fallen condition. Now what we do in faith as those whose pasts he sanctifies, whose resolves he strengthens, and whose futures he secures must be seen as a result of what he has done and is doing in and through us (1 Cor. 15:16–17; Phil. 1:12–13; 1 Pet. 4:10–11). Every aspect, action, and hope of the Christian life finds its motive, strength, and source in Christ, or it is not of Christ. The truths of Scripture that do not anticipate or culminate in Christ’s ministry must at least be preached as a consequence of his work, or
we rip them from the context that identifies them with the Christian message.\textsuperscript{33}

By recognizing that all Scripture predicts, prepares for, reflects, or results from the ministry of Christ, preachers unfold the road map that keeps them traveling to the heart of the Bible no matter where they journey in its pages. Such a road map makes this seemingly quaint advice of Spurgeon to a young preacher ring with great spiritual 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 a road towards the great metropolis, Christ. And my dear brother, your business is, when you get to a text, to say, now what 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.\textsuperscript{34}

By identifying the redemptive content, character, or context of a passage, one can heed Spurgeon's instruction so as to discern not merely the savour of Christ in every text but also his pervading presence made evident by his grace.

**Recognizing Nonredemptive Messages**

Messages that are not Christ-centered (i.e., not redemptively focused) inevitably become human-centered, even though the drift most frequently occurs unintentionally among evangelical preachers. These preachers do not deliberately exclude Christ's ministry from their own, but by consistently preaching messages on the order of

“Five Steps to a Better Marriage,” “How to Make God Answer Your Prayer,” and “Achieving Holiness through the Power of Resolve,” they present godliness entirely as a product of human endeavor. Although such preaching is intended for good, its exclusive focus a Redemptive Approach to Preaching 289 on actuating or accessing divine blessing through human works carries the message, “It is the doing of these things that will get you right with God and/or your neighbor.” No message is more damaging to true faith. By making human efforts alone the measure and the cause of godliness, evangelicals fall victim to the twin assaults of theological legalism and liberalism—which despite their perceived opposition are actually identical in making one's relationship with God dependent on human goodness.

Preachers may protest, “But I assume my people understand they must base their efforts on faith and repentance.” Why should we assume listeners will understand what we rarely say, what the structure of our communication contradicts, and what their own nature denies? Can we not as preachers confess that even we feel holier when our devotions last longer, when we parent well, when we pastor wisely, or when tears fall during our repentance? While there is certainly nothing wrong with any of these actions, we deny the basis of our own faith when we begin to believe or act as though our actions, by their own merit, win God's favor. Were this true, then instruction to “take hold of those bootstraps and pick yourself up so that God will love you more” would not be wrong. But sola bootstraps messages are wrong, and faithful preachers must not only avoid this error but also war against it.
The Deadly Be’s

Messages that strike at the heart of faith rather than support it often have an identifying theme. They exhort believers to strive to “be” something in order to be loved by God. Whether this equation is stated or implied, inadvertent or intentional, overt or subtle, the result is the same: an undermining of biblical faith. Such damage is usually inflicted by preachers striving to be biblical and unaware of the harm they are causing because they see their ideas supported in the narrow slice of Scripture they are expounding. They can point to the five steps for a better marriage in the text. They can support the standards of holiness they advocate with flawless exegesis. What they do not see is the erosion of hope they cause weekly by preaching messages biblical in origin but not biblically complete. We can recognize such incomplete messages by the “be” category into which they frequently fall.

“Be Like” Messages

“Be like” messages focus the attention of listeners on the accomplishments of a particular biblical character. After identifying the exemplary characteristics of the character, the preacher exhorts listeners to be like that person in some commendable aspect of his or her personality or practice. In what is often called biographical preaching, pastors urge congregants to be like Moses, Gideon, David, Daniel, or Peter in the face of a trial, temptation, or challenge.35 Such exemplars, of course, can be used beneficially for instructing God’s people in proper conduct and character. Biblical writers clearly intend for certain biblical characters to represent specific characteristics of godliness. A difficulty with much biographical preaching, however, is that it typically fails to honor the care that the Bible also takes to tarnish almost every patriarch or saint within its pages. Without blushing, the Bible honestly presents the human frailties of its most significant characters so that we will not expect to find, within fallen humanity, any whose model behavior merits divine acceptance. For instance, while many sermons exhort listeners to emulate David’s courage, wisdom, and love for God, such messages hardly present a full (or honest) picture of the shepherd king’s life without mention of his adultery, murder, and faithlessness. Were we to ask David whom believers should emulate, can we imagine that his answer would be, “Me”? If even the biblical characters themselves would not exhort us to model our lives after theirs, then we cannot remain faithful to Scripture and simply command a congregation to be like them. Neither do we help others by encouraging them to be like Jesus if we do not simultaneously remind them that his standards are always beyond them, apart from his enabling grace.

Preachers may quickly protest that in encouraging listeners to be like a biblical character, they are really only encouraging them to imitate the commendable aspects of the person the Bible itself praises. To be faithful to Scripture, we must not shy away from passages that encourage us to use people in the Bible as examples (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:1; Heb. 11:39). Still, before we preach on such passages, we must be sure to identify the source of the character quality that Scripture commends. Since the source of any holy trait is God’s grace, we must echo the biblical caution, “Where then is boasting?” In addition, we
must make it plain to listeners that grace cannot be self-stimulated or self-sustained. Since empowering grace is entirely of God, its fruit offers no personal merit in terms of justifying us before God (cf. Rom. 3:27; 1 Cor. 3:5–23). Simply telling people to imitate godliness in another person without reminding them that true holiness must come from dependence on God will force them either to despair of spiritual transformation or to deny its need.

The commendable aspects of biblical characters function in Scripture like aspects of God’s law: They are necessary to know, proper to follow, and are the instruments of God’s blessing in our lives. But these same righteous standards become spiritually deadly when they are perceived or honored as the basis of God’s acceptance. Preachers should teach God’s people to esteem and emulate the righteous actions of godly people in the Bible, but preachers must also make it plain that such godliness can come only as a response to God’s unconditional love and as a result of his enabling Spirit (Phil. 1:19–21). Sermons that preach imitation of saints in isolation from the Savior profit nothing (see John 15:5; Eph. 3:16–19). Without the provision of his grace, we cannot be people he desires.

“Be Good” Messages

Similar to focusing on biographies apart from enabling grace is an emphasis on behaviors alone that also results in nonredemptive messages. Again, preachers of such messages are usually unaware of the harm of devoting an entire sermon to telling people to be good or holy. God expects holiness. He commands it. He devotes innumerable passages in Scripture to telling us what to do and what not to do. So what could possibly be wrong with exhorting people to be good? Again, the problem often lies not in what preachers say but in what they fail to say.

When the focus of a sermon becomes a moralistic “Don’t smoke or chew or go with those who do” (or even a more sophisticated “Renew your heart by doing what God commands”), listeners will most likely assume that they can secure or renew their relationship with God through proper behaviors. Even when the behaviors advocated are reasonable, biblical, and correct, a sermon that does not move from expounding standards of obedience to explaining the source, motives, and results of obedience places persons’ hopes in their own actions. In such a situation, each succeeding Sunday sermon carries the implicit message, “Since you weren’t good enough for God last week, hunker down and try harder this week.”

Preaching of this sort sounds biblical because the Bible can be quoted at length to support the exhortations. As it runs its course, however, such preaching destroys all Christian distinctives. Preachers caught in a purely moralistic mode of instruction end up speaking in tautologies: “Be good because it’s good to be good, and it’s bad to be bad. Christians are good. So be good!”

Ringing clearly through such preaching is the implied promise, “Obey God because he will love you if you do and will get you if you don’t.” A following week’s sermon may be an evangelistic appeal to come to the cross for grace freely offered, but what grace means in this context probably has little to do with biblical teaching. Evangelical preaching that implies we are saved by grace but kept by our obe-
dience not only undermines the work of God in sanctification but ultimately casts doubt on the nature of God (i.e., he loves us only when we are good enough) and thus makes salvation itself suspect when we honestly assess our imperfections.

The natural tendency of all believers is to base our estimation of our justification on our personal progress in sanctification.\(^3\)\(^6\) We estimate whether we are okay with God on the basis of how we did today. Were we good enough? Did we fail to honor our ideals? Did we hurt anyone or break any commandments? Yet the truth of the gospel is that sanctification is based on what Jesus did eternally. Because Jesus died and rose again on our behalf, we are cleansed of our sin and reconciled to God. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), and we progressively live for God in the confidence that we are in union with his life and power solely on the basis of what he has fully and finally accomplished on the cross (Gal. 2:20). Our experience of his blessings, pleasure, and nearness still relies on our obedience, but the reality of our relationship is not and never was based on our goodness.\(^3\)\(^7\) God has fully and completely applied to us the merits of Christ’s righteousness, even though we are striving to live in conformity with his law in loving response to his redeeming work (Rom. 5:15–21; 1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 5:25–27).\(^3\)\(^8\)

If God were to make his love conditional on our goodness, then we might obey him, but we would not like him very much. The consequence would be that both love for God and true obedience would be destroyed, since only those who love him really do what he commands (John 14:15). Preaching applications should readily and vigorously exhort obedience to God’s commands, but such exhortations should be based primarily on responding in love to God’s grace, not on trying to gain or maintain it (Rom. 12:1).

“BE DISCIPLINED” MESSAGES

Close kin to “be good” messages are sermons that exhort believers to improve their relationship with God through more diligent use of the means of grace. Such messages do not merely advocate moral behavior but typically encourage believers to practice more regularly, sincerely, or methodically those disciplines that allegedly will lift them to higher planes of divine approval (or, if left undone, will reap divine displeasure). Such preachers intone, “Pray more, read the Bible more, go to church more, and have better quiet times with God.” If pressed to explain these exhortations theologically, few would actually say that they believe the practice of these Christian disciplines earns believers extra points with God. Few, however, will argue with the parishioner who says, “I had a terrible day today. This always seems to happen when I get up too late for my quiet time.”

The reason so few preachers will object to such a statement is that many of us live as though our disciplines make us acceptable to God or earn us credit with him. Because our identity is so tied to observances of our religious practices, we feel unworthy if we have neglected daily prayer or shortchanged our Bible memorization. Something in us also believes that the day would probably have gone better if we had only been more diligent. There are, of course, real consequences of faithlessness. Shortchanging sermon preparation tends to result in poor sermons, and regular neglect of prayer tends to re-
suit in a perceived distancing of God's hand. The warping of faith and preaching occurs, however, with the belief that disciplines ward off God's ire or buy his favor. In such a case, the problem is not the biblical discipline we practice but the type of God we perceive. He becomes the ogre in the sky who requires the daily satisfaction of our toil to dispense his favor or restrain his displeasure.

Few preachers intentionally paint this picture of a God so readily vexed, but when they present the Christian disciplines in isolation from the grace that motivates, sanctifies, and secures, such a portrait necessarily emerges. If devotion to disciplines procures our position or privileges with God, then grace becomes something we manufacture by our works, making grace meaningless. And since no degree of human diligence can compensate the Lord for all we truly owe him, an insistence on more exercise of disciplines to satisfy God only makes those most honest about their merits less sure of their standing. Brownie points count for little in an economy in which absolute holiness remains the only acceptable currency.

The true efficacy of spiritual disciplines is not their power to bribe God but their usefulness in opening hearts to the perception and exercise of his power. Spiritual disciplines enable those made righteous by Christ's work to breathe more deeply the resources that God freely and lovingly provides for the wisdom, joy, and strength of Christian living. Through disciplines, we inhale more deeply the air God provides for the Christian race, but such disciplines do not produce or maintain the oxygen of God's love. Preachers should encourage more prayer, stewardship, study, and fellowship not to manufacture blessing but so that believers can experience more fully the benefits of union with Christ that God freely offers. With this perspective, disciplines become regular refreshment for those who hunger and thirst for ever deeper fellowship with the God they love (Ps. 19:10). The same disciplines, however, will become distasteful duty or bitter pride for those who think that their devotion keeps them on the good side of a God whose measure of love is determined by the grade of their performance.

**The Bottom Line**

"Be" messages that contain only moral instruction imply that we are able to change our fallen condition in our own strength. Such sermons communicate (although usually unintentionally) that we make the path to grace and that our works earn and/or secure our acceptance with God. However well intended, these sermons present a faith indistinguishable from that of morally conscientious Muslims, Unitarians, Buddhists, or Hindus. The distinctive of the Christian faith is that God provides the way to himself because we cannot make our way to him. This is just as true for progressive sanctification as it is for original justification. A sermon no different from a childhood imperative to be a "Do Bee" rather than a "Don't Bee" places more responsibility on a child of God than the gospel will allow.

The fundamental biblical truth that differentiates the gospel from a morality lesson is the declaration that our works always remain tainted by our humanity. Of themselves our actions can never earn God's
blessing or secure his favor (Isa. 64:6; Luke 17:10). Although there are blessed consequences to heeding divine commands designed for our good, mere conformity to biblical commands offers no heavenly merit.39 If we had to earn grace prior to or after we came to Christ, it would not be grace that we gained.

There are many “be” messages in Scripture, but they always reside in a redemptive context. Since we cannot be anything that God would approve of apart from his sanctifying mercy and power, grace must permeate any exhortation for biblical behavior. “Be” messages are not wrong in themselves; they are wrong messages by themselves. People cannot do or be what God requires without the past, present, and future work of Christ. “From him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom. 11:36). Simply railing at error and hammering at piety may convince people of their inadequacy or move them toward self-sufficiency, but these messages also keep true godliness remote. Thus, instruction in biblical behavior barren of redemptive truth only wounds. Though it is offered as an antidote to sin, such preaching either promotes Pharisaism or prompts despair. Christ-centered preachers accept neither alternative. They understand that if they wound, they are obligated to heal. People pierced to the heart by awareness of the magnitude of their biblical obligations and personal limitations find salve for their souls when preachers proclaim the fulfillment of God’s holy standards in Christ and by his Spirit.

Christ-centered preachers do not hesitate to present the moral imperatives the Lord demands, but neither do they deny him the position of honor in all that his Word says or in all that his creatures do.40 Challenges to holiness must be accompanied by a Christ focus or they will promote only human-centered, doomed-to-fail religion. When we exhort congregations to stand for God against the assaults of Satan, we must never forget the balance of the Pauline imperative: “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might” (Eph. 6:10 KJV). Amid his most strident “be” message, the apostle remained Christ-focused. Today’s preacher has no lesser obligation. We should not preach God’s requirements in isolation from God’s grace because the holiness God requires he also must provide. If we neglect the means of grace, then we deny the possibility of obedience.

Faithful expository preaching unfolds every text in the context of its redemptive import. The success of this endeavor can be assessed by a bottom-line question 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? If they march to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil with only me, myself, and I, then each parades to despair. However, if the sermon has led all persons to God’s grace, then they may walk into the world with their Savior—and with fresh hope. Whether people depart alone or in the Savior’s hand marks the difference between futility and faith, legalism and true obedience, do-goodism and real godliness.

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. How does clear identification of an FCF prepare a preacher to construct a redemptive message?
2. How can a message advocate biblical behavior and still remain sub-Christian?

3. How does biblical theology act as a fish-eye lens?

4. What are four possible redemptive foci that characterize biblical texts?

5. The most common method of identifying a redemptive message in a text that makes no specific mention of Christ requires a preacher to ask the question, What does this text reflect of God’s nature that _____ redemption and/or human nature that _____ redemption?

6. What are the “deadly be’s”? Explain why they are not wrong in themselves but become dangerous by themselves?

**Exercises**

1. Explain how you could present redemptive messages on three of the following passages:
   Judges 7
   Proverbs 5
   Ezra 2
   Colossians 3:18–4:1
   James 2:14–26

2. Discuss how the redemptive thrust of all Scripture should affect the way you instruct listeners about matters of Christian obedience.

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1. See the discussion and definition of the Fallen Condition Focus in chap. 2.


7. Ibid., 7.

8. Ibid., 5, 6.

9. It cannot be denied that the Scripture writers (or at least the divine Author) intended for particular passages to be viewed from multiple perspectives to provide various opportunities to emphasize moral obligation, doctrinal articulation, historical sequence, character development, or worship instruction. Still, expositors must not forget the one who is the yes and the amen of all God’s promises, the alpha and the omega of all God’s purposes, the beginning and the end of all holy endeavor, the first and the last means of performing all scriptural duty (2 Cor. 1:12; Rev. 22:13). Preachers should be well aware of the various perspectival purposes and layers individual texts may contain. But the absence of grace from whatever instruction a preacher ultimately offers will automatically identify a locus grown too narrow for Christian purposes (cf. John 5:39, 46).


14. See the technical definition of topical and textual messages in chap. 6.