

A Book Review (Reaction Paper):
Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Message

I. SUMMARY

Bryan Chapell's contribution to the field of preaching (which is now a surprising ten years old), is an essential and cogent work that every pastor should read – and often. The subtitle, “Redeeming the Expository Sermon” serves a dual meaning. It calls for the redemption or rescue of the sermon and additionally, it exhorts pastors to give the sermon redemptive qualities by keeping both the human condition and the grace of Christ in the forefront of parishoners.

The Book of Contents reveals the book simple outline (principles, preparation, and theology of Christ-Centered Messages) which also serves as a logical progression for actually fashioning a sermon from scratch. The book unfolds what the back covers verbalizes as, “A Practical and Theological Guide for Biblical Preaching” or even more succinctly, “The two words about which the whole of this work could be wrapped are authority and redemption” (p. 11). In my opinion, the book's content is weighted more heavily on the “redemption” aspect.

This book is a clarion call pastors to engage in a biblical model of bold, Christ-centered proclamation of the whole counsel of God. The cry of Chapell is, “Preaching that is faithful to the whole of Scripture not only establishes God's requirements, but also highlights the redemptive truths that make holiness possible” (p. 12). May it not fall on deaf ears.

He admits that he himself is the recipient of the grace of God, mediated through God's people, as he is very candid about the influence of his seminary professor, Robert G. Rayburn,

who Chapell quotes as saying, “Christ is the only King of your studies, but homiletics is the queen” (p. 17). It seems to me, that this book is the author’s attempt to pass this baton on to his readers (2 Tim. 2:2).

II. ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

1. Strengths and Weaknesses.

There are many strengths in this book (some of which I will discuss in later sections of this reaction paper). To begin with, before each chapter the author inserts the contents of the chapter in summary form and also includes the goals of each chapter (seems like a model from preaching and the classroom) and then he completes each chapter with “Questions For Review And Discussion”, and “Exercises”. This provides the reader an opportunity to know where the author is headed, and then review where he, the reader, has been taken. Similarly, the resources at the end of the book (Appendices) are worth the price of the book. He deals with the practical outworking of ministry (reading Scripture, Weddings, Funerals, etc.). I can’t believe I had never read this book!

Secondly, the book has a very logical flow to it. For example, from the very beginning (which is the correct placement), the author contends that all the homiletical prowess must flow and stem from the proper view of God’s Word. Only it has the power to transform. This example is followed throughout the entire book. Another fine example of Chapell’s dedication to biblical revelation is the author’s development of application, but only insofar as it stems out of an accurate theology.

Thirdly, this work excels in its demand for the supremacy of God’s Holy Word in our sermons. It is all about authorial intent and the writer states this very clearly, saying, “The meaning of the passage is the message of the sermon” (p. 23). This concise sentence is packed

with meaning and it makes the sermon full of God's meaning. Chapell will not allow the "what does this text mean to me?" approach.

Fourthly, Chapell's section on the "Fallen Condition Focus" is superb. The author defines this as, "the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or for whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage" (p. 42). The preacher is exhorted to take notice of similarities that the original audience and the modern day congregations both have. This shared, common situation or circumstance is the basis for the application in the sermon. This point of contact, if you will, will be the launching point for the "so what?" of the sermon. This helpful hint is extremely beneficial when it comes to character studies or other passages that do not directly teach us about the Lord, such as narratives or poetry.

Finally, the section on outlining with application ("Outlining and Structure") helps tremendously. Chapell lays it straight out proclaiming, "Experienced preachers also usually take passives and the notes out of main points. Application clauses worded with passive verbs do not exhort people to do anything" (p. 147). The writer urges the reader to use an "Application Consistent Outline" (p. 146), and to "Avoid the trap of making merely descriptive outlines – main points should be hortatory in nature" (p. 149). This ensures a sermon that is replete with application and is not simply, and dutifully, tacked on at the end of a message.

The area of strongest disagreement with the author that I had was with this statement, "This must be the goal of expository preaching: the particulars of a passage need to be related to the overall purpose of Scripture" (p. 73). Followed to the logical extreme, I think he is biting off more than he can, or should, chew. Instead of explaining this, he leaves the reader hanging until Chapter 10 and 11 when he touches on this in greater detail. Chapell purports the grammatico-

historical method of interpretation (p. 70), but seems to deviate slightly from it as he insists upon, what I would call, a grammatico-historical-redemptive hermeneutic.

On a side note (but not necessarily a strong disagreement), the author includes a good chapter entitled, “The Process of Explanation”, which is a compact outworking of what the pastor should do in his study. The problem is that it doesn’t seem to fit in this book, a book that addresses, for the most part, non introductory homiletical issues. Chapell’s book does not seem to be written to the novice.

2. How is the Author’s Approach to Preaching Similar or Different from My Heritage and Conviction (theologically, hermeneutically, and stylistically).

I match up with the author in a very similar fashion when it comes to my theological background and beliefs. Within the last several years, after a lot of reflection about the moralism and legalism that exists within Christianity, I have bolstered my convictions regarding preaching imperatives without indicatives (in both salvation and sanctification contexts). If it takes me two years to preach through the book of Ephesians, then one full year could be in the practical, exhortative chapters (4-6), without any basis for the commands. Knowing this, I am more cognizant of the fact that my people need to weekly understand the commands in this section stem from their position, being “in Christ,” and that they have the ability to obey.

With that said, I would heartily concur with Chapell’s statement where he says, “If the applications lose sight of the FCF, the message will degenerate into a handful of legalisms tacked onto randomly selected observations” (p. 202). He is a real stickler on giving the “self-help gospel” (p. 209) a wide berth. I agree and my own reformed convictions see eye to eye with him. I think this is critical if the congregation is to understand the love of God for His children and to instruct the people that obedience out of duty is good, but it is not the only motivation for

imitating God. The author reflects this thinking by saying, “If we serve God because we believe he will love us less if we do not, punish us more if we do less, or bless us more if we do more, then we are not worshiping God with our actions; we are only pursuing our self-interests” (p. 208)

My area of slight disagree is best grappled with after hearing from Chapell himself. He says, “However, the application of an expository sermon is not complete until the pastor has disclosed the grace in the text that rightly stimulates the obedient response of believers” (p. 209). While I think I understand what he is trying to protect us from, I believe that some sermons, although devoid of specific discussions of the grace that enables obedience, will be understood correctly because of the overall context in which they are received. The worship service itself (which will inevitably contain references to grace and mercy) is certainly a proper umbrella that spreads itself over all aspects of worship, including the sermon. In this context, a series of imperatives given by Paul will be understood under the rubric of the Cross of Christ Jesus. That is why I believe it is appropriate to preach “Be” sermons (or as Paul says in Ephesians 4 and 5, “become”), simply because it is biblical and it is given in a redemptive context of worship. Having said that, I believe modern day evangelicalism would benefit greatly by grappling with what Chapell is preaching here. As is so often the case, maybe he swings the corrective pendulum a little too far in response.

Lastly, in terms of hermeneutics, I am very much in agreement with the writer, with the exception being his eschatology and over-emphasis (in my opinion) on Covenant Theology.

3. This Book’s Vital Contribution to the Rationale of My Ministry.

The fundamental donation that this book has deposited into my ministry has not been by addition, but rather, by affirmation. It has been a book that has in effect said, “stay on course,

stay on target.” He makes a good case for “lectio continua”, that is to say, preaching that is consecutive and sequential. I especially was struck by his statement that, “every heretic has his verse” (p. 71). This book should be the nail in the coffin to buttress and affirm local churches, and their pastors, against topical sermons (as a steady diet). With few exceptions, I strive to employ (albeit not as well as I should), at least the tenor of what this homiletic book prescribes.

I fully subscribe to his fundamental dogma, “If Scripture does not determine meaning, ultimately Scripture has no meaning” (p. 70). I pray that my ministry would reflect this attitude about the high calling of preaching and I believe that this rationale can be imported into the topical versus expositional argument. My own take would read, “If Scripture does not determine the sermon, ultimately the sermon has no meaning!”

4. Elements of Discussed Preaching that I intend to Employ.

The first element that I want to utilize is to remember that the goal of the sermon is what it should be. Chapell rightfully says it is not, “a lecture about Bible facts. They want and need a sermon that demonstrates how the information in the Bible applies to their lives” (p. 77). I desire to cement into my ministry so that my application is not, to use Broadus’ words, “merely an appendage” (quoted on page 79). Chapell has convicted me with statements like, “To expound Scripture fully means to unfold the meaning of a text in such a way that listeners can confront, understand, and act on its truths” (p. 84). This approach, similar to the method advocated by Dr. Akin and Dr. York, must be more of a planned focus for me.

The author’s statement, “Information without application yields frustration” (p. 48) is absolutely correct. I stand accused and convicted of that and the following, “Preachers make a fundamental mistake when they assume that by providing parishioners with biblical information the people will automatically make the connection between scriptural truth and their everyday

lives” (p. 199). Chapell has a way of quickly lancing the reading with pithy and effective quotes like, “Share the fruit, not the sweat, of your exegetical labor” (p. 121).

Lastly, I need to work on an area that Chapell elucidates on page 89, where he simply filets me. He states, “Too often expository preachers get stuck in one gear, seeming to believe that to preach with authority they must project a certain hardness into their sermons. They sound as though they are trying by their efforts to make the Word authoritative rather than trusting its innate power to touch the soul.” Uses modern preachers as an illustration, I think I need to incorporate a little more of Chuck Swindoll into my MacArthur-like approach. The difficult part for me is preaching each message with a style that matches the message content and genre. Chapell is right and is speaking to me on this issue when he says, “No one approach, attitude, or tone will suit all occasions” (p. 92). I tend to preach the same way all too often. I need to reflect the sense of the passage with my pulpit style and demeanor. I intellectually understand that a sermon on hell and another one on heaven, should be preached in way that reflects, or mirrors the contents of the passage. My problem is doing what I believe!

I really think that this book is a wonderful book and refresher for the battle worn pastor. It is one of my favorite books on preaching and I intend to read it often.