

# Reclaiming God-Centered Preaching

by Darryl Dash

David Neff, an editor of *Christianity Today*, tells of visiting a church one summer on his vacation. The first week, the preacher spoke on the story of God's call to Moses at the burning bush. In this passage, God reveals how he will fulfill his promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through Moses. He also reveals his ineffable name. It is a "pivotal point in the Bible," Neff writes, "a hinge on which the door of sacred history swings."

The preacher rose to speak on this passage. Moses was afraid to walk through the door set before him, said the preacher, but he walked through it anyway. We must do the same. "End of message," Neff writes. "No God. No divine plan revealed. No theophany. Just stages in the life cycle."

The next week, Neff returned to hear a different preacher. The sermon text was the story of Jesus calming the storm, thereby revealing that he is Lord over creation. The preacher chose to speak about the fear of travel. "The sermon many have soothed some fears," Neff writes, "but theologically it crashed and burned. I didn't come back the next Sunday."

Neff argues that these two sermons are not isolated examples of bad preaching. Evangelicals, he writes, often strip miracles of their biblical significance, reduce parables to lessons for effective living, and hand out moralisms and three-step how-to's.<sup>1</sup>

Two decades ago, *Preaching and Pulpit Digest* studied 200 sermons preached by evangelicals. The study analyzed how many of the sermons were grounded in the character, nature, and will of God. Only 19.5% met this test. Reflecting on this study, theologian David Wells writes:

The overwhelming proportion of sermons - more than 80 percent - were anthropocentric. It seems that God has become a rather awkward appendage to the practice of evangelical faith, at least as measured by the pulpit. Indeed, from these sermons it seems that God and the supernatural order are related only with difficulty to the life of faith. He appears not to be at its center. The center, in fact, is typically the self. God and His world are made to spin around this surrogate center, for our world increasingly is understood within a therapeutic model of reality.<sup>2</sup>

I do not know how many sermons today are grounded in God's character, nature, and will, but my guess is that things have not improved.

Few preachers set out to preach sermons that trivialize Scripture, reduce a passage to a set of how-to lessons, and push God to the side. Yet it appears that this happens frequently, and with disastrous results.

Our churches desperately need preaching that is both God-centered and relevant, and one of our greatest needs is to learn how to do this. If we fail to preach this way, we dishonor God, twist Scripture, and rob our listeners of the biblical message. If we learn to preach God-centered, relevant sermons, our preaching will glorify God, be accurate, and genuinely help our listeners and churches.

Before we explore how to do preach like this, we must first recognize some of the ways that we have strayed from a God-centered approach and wandered into human-centered preaching.

### **Three Human-Centered Approaches**

I have observed three approaches to preaching that lead to human-centered sermons.

The first approach is **therapeutic preaching**. This preaching focuses on people's felt needs such as how to build relationships, handle stress, manage money, raise children, and resolve conflicts. In a therapeutic culture, the pressure to preach this way is intense.

Therapeutic preaching, however, comes at a cost. It is often not based on a vision of God and the gospel. It can lead to a self-help approach and narcissism. At its worst, it can resemble a Christian version of pop-psychology, or what one person calls “chicken soup for the Christian life.” This type of preaching brings to mind “the image of Jesus calling Lazarus from the grave”, write Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk. “Most preaching is about how to cope with a life wrapped in grave clothing that is never removed.”<sup>3</sup>

Haddon Robinson, author of *Biblical Preaching*, recounts hearing a sermon on how to overcome procrastination. He knew they were in trouble, he says, when the first point was to buy a DayTimer. “The Bible is a book about God,” Robinson writes. “It is not a religious book of advice about the 'answers' we need about a happy marriage, sex, work, or losing weight. Although the Scriptures reflect on many of those issues, they are above all about who God is and what God thinks and wills. I understand reality only if I have an appreciation for who he is and what he desires for his creation and from his creation.”<sup>4</sup>

A second human-centered approach is **moralistic preaching**. This type of emphasizes life application and take-home action steps. Many popular preachers argue that sermons need to be practical and offer clear application points.

While application is essential, preaching that over-emphasizes application can lead to numerous problems. Application points, by themselves, can lead to application fatigue, in which the listener is overwhelmed with more tasks to put on a list that is already full.

Our listeners need a vision of God and his gospel that changes every part of their lives, not just more tasks to be completed. To-do lists don't change souls.

In Scripture, obedience is always a response to the gospel. Application that is not rooted in gospel leads to pride if the listener succeeds, and defeatism if the listener does not. The law does not give us power to obey its commands; we need good news (the gospel), not just good advice. The Bible does contain commands, but these are always applications of the gospel.

Moralism can creep into how-to sermons (e.g. "Four Steps to Better Parenting"), but it can also creep into expositions of a text. For example, preaching the imperatives of Ephesians 4-6 will be moralistic unless we link the imperatives to the gospel described in Ephesians 1-3. God's gift and his commands (theology and ethics) are always linked.

Moralism can also creep into biographical preaching if we offer characters as examples to emulate. We are sometimes called to emulate their faith (Hebrews 11), but are rarely told to use them as moral examples. Tim Keller describes what happens when we use them this way. "An example - even a great example - can only crush you," he says. "It's crushing because it's an inaccessible standard."<sup>5</sup> Because of our fallen natures, we cannot simply do what Jesus, or any other great character, did. Even when we encounter great characters, they are examples of faith and of God's grace.

In any case, most of the characters in the Bible have mixed records at best, and point to God as the real hero of the text. Keller says:

You're assuming that the message of the Bible is "God blesses and saves those who live morally exemplary lives." That's not the message of the Bible. The message of the Bible is that God persistently and continuously gives his grace to people who don't ask for it, don't deserve it, and don't even fully appreciate it after they get it.<sup>6</sup>

Our preaching must root obedience in what God has accomplished in Christ. It is the motive and source of all obedience. Preaching application without gospel is moralistic and fails to transform lives.

A third human-centered approach is **allegorical preaching**. Surprisingly, allegorical preaching is widespread. For example, preachers use the story of Jesus calming the storm to talk about how Jesus calms the storms of life. They use the story of David and Goliath as an example of how we can slay the giants in our lives, like fear, cancer, or joblessness. The miracle of the wine at the wedding in Cana is used as a springboard to talk about God's provision when we are at the end of our resources. Elements of the stories - storms, giants, and wine - are taken out of the historical context and made to stand for something else in the listener's life.

The preacher must bring the text into the present. Allegorizing sections passages is a quick way to do this, but it fails to wrestle with the authorial intent and often leads to

inaccurate messages. For example, the preacher who says that Jesus calms the storms of life not only misses the purpose and meaning of that text, but promises something that the Bible does not warrant. This is both unbiblical and unhelpful.

All three of these approaches come from a desire to be relevant in our preaching. Relevance is essential, but human-centered messages fall far short of what preaching is supposed to be. We need an approach to preaching that is both God-centered *and* relevant.

### **A God-Centered Approach**

A God-centered approach to preaching is based on two presuppositions, and two practices.

**The first presupposition is that God is relevant.** Ultimately, preaching is a reflection of our theology of God. If one believes that God is all-sufficient, and that all things exist in relationship to him and for his glory, then preaching will center itself on God. If one has a lesser view of God, then that preacher will speak on lesser things. John Piper says that people are starved for the greatness of God. Our preaching will reveal how strongly we agree with this presupposition.

J.I. Packer writes:

Knowing God is crucially important for the living of our lives...We are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentenced yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.<sup>7</sup>

**The second presupposition is that Scripture is God-centered.** If our preaching is biblical, a God-centered Bible should lead to God-centered preaching. This is not to say that humans are excluded; we find people on every page of Scripture. But the Bible is about God, and people in relation to him. We must resist the temptation we face every day to place ourselves at the center of the universe, especially as we approach Scripture, which is God's revelation of himself. Donald Miller writes, "The most difficult lie I have ever contended with is this: Life is a story about me."<sup>8</sup> We need to confront this lie every time we read Scripture.

These two presuppositions lead to two practices.

**The first practice is exegetical.** Exegesis involves studying the text: examining the context and structure, and examining the passage using literary, grammatical, and historic-cultural interpretation. In exegesis, we try to understand the meaning of the text, and the author's intent in writing it.

As we prepare God-centered sermons, our exegesis must ask two questions of the text. First, “What is the vision of God in this passage?”<sup>9</sup> What does it reveal about God’s character, acts, grace, and will? God is present in every text, even if the text does not explicitly mention him.

Second, what “aspect of our fallen condition [in the text]...requires and displays God’s provision?”<sup>10</sup> Robinson writes:

This human factor is the condition that men and women have in common with the characters in the Bible. The human factor may show up in sins such as rebellion, unbelief, adultery, greed, laziness, selfishness, or gossip. It may also show up in people puzzling about the human condition as a result of sickness, grief, anxiety, doubt, trials, or the sense that God has misplaced their names and addresses. It is this human factor that usually prompted the prophets and apostles to speak or write what they did.<sup>11</sup>

If we are to preach a biblical message that is both God-centered and relevant, then we must answer these two questions at the exegesis stage of preparation. The preacher must discover the God-centered message and its application during exegesis.

**The second practice is homiletical.** Once we identify the meaning and purpose of the text, and identify the vision of God and how that vision meets our need as fallen creatures, we must structure the sermon to reveal the need exposed in the passage, encountered in the people before us, and how it is met in God. This takes pastoral sensitivity and a commitment to accurately communicate Scripture to real people.

Since Scripture reveals God’s saving acts, culminating in Christ’s accomplishments at the cross, we are essentially applying the gospel to every need. Every sermon becomes an exposition of the gospel. However, we do not apply the gospel in a rote manner. The vision of God, and the human factor raised in the text, provide fresh avenues to communicate the gospel to a variety of human situations faced by the people before us.

We desperately need preachers who do this. This type of preaching will pull us “out of our own drama and cast as characters in his unfolding plot,” where “we become part of the greatest story ever told,” writes Michael Horton. “It is through God’s word of judgment (law) and salvation (gospel) that we are transferred from our own ‘life movie’ and inserted into the grand narrative that revolves around Jesus Christ.”<sup>12</sup> I can’t imagine a better way to preach or to live.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> David Neff, "Beyond Self-Help Chatter," *CT Library*, October 23, 2000, <http://ctlibrary.com/16087>.
- <sup>2</sup> David F. Wells, "The D-Min-ization of Ministry," in *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*, ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 184-185.
- <sup>3</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 67-68.
- <sup>4</sup> Haddon Robinson, "The High Call of Preaching," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 23-24.
- <sup>5</sup> "Exemplars and Signposts," *Theocentric Preaching*, <http://www.theocentricpreaching.com/2007/04/25/exemplars-and-signposts/>.
- <sup>6</sup> "The Message of the Bible and Moral Exemplars," *Theocentric Preaching*, <http://www.theocentricpreaching.com/2007/04/19/the-message-of-the-bible-and-moral-exemplars/>.
- <sup>7</sup> J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 14.
- <sup>8</sup> Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 182.
- <sup>9</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 94.
- <sup>10</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 270.
- <sup>11</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 94-95.
- <sup>12</sup> Michael S. Horton, "Joel Osteen: Are You in God's Story or Is God in Yours?" *White Horse Inn*, <http://www.whitehorseinn.org/osteenart03.htm>.