

Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture

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So often in preaching we can lose sight of the forest for the trees. We become so lost in the intricacies and wonders God has placed before us in our chosen text that we fail to appreciate that text's unique place within the greater marvel of the whole vista of salvation history. Graeme Goldsworthy's book seeks to help us keep our feet firmly planted in sound biblical theology so that, wherever we are in Scripture, we have a distinct and clear compass point from which to navigate within that text. His book seeks to accomplish that task in two major divisions. In the first part he shares with the reader a sound biblical theology within the context of preaching. In the second part of the book he seeks to apply that truth to specific types of texts as he helps us "to understand how [Scripture's] different literary genres function as vehicles for theological truth" (p. 137).

It is not hard to discern the central concern of Goldsworthy's book. He is pleading with us on every page to appropriately and contextually preach Christ and his gospel from every text. In the first sentence of the preface he trumpets a clear tone that he sounds repeatedly throughout the book: "The aim of this book is to provide a handbook for preachers that will help them apply a consistently Christ-centered approach to their sermons" (p. ix). As he is about to bring the first major part of the book to its close, he similarly encourages and warns by saying:

Any sermon, then, that aims to apply the biblical text to the congregation and does so without making it crystal clear that it is in Christ alone and through Christ alone that the application is realized, is not a Christian sermon. It is at best an exercise in wishful and pietistic thinking. It is at worst demonic in its Christ-denying legalism (p. 124).

We cannot afford to assume that our hearers will fill in the Christ-gaps in our sermons (p. 54-55). To presume that we can make gospel assumptions rather than to proclaim explicit gospel is to court spiritual disaster for our hearers (p. 54-55, 81).

As someone who stands more regularly in a seminary classroom rather than a congregational pulpit, I will finish this evaluation with another bulleted summary of insights that I plan to share with my first and second-year preaching students:

- Since the greatest challenge – from the perspective of “conservative,” confessional Lutheran preaching – is typically not leaving Christ out, but “dragging” him into the sermon with caricatured predictability, I look forward to having my students wrestle with understanding what Goldsworthy means by the predictable “Jesus bit” (p. xi) in sermons. Such formulaic gospel preaching ignores the infinite variety of Scripture in its presentation of law and gospel and falls “into a trap whereby we are left preaching the same message from all passages.... ‘Ten thousand, thousand, are their texts, but all their sermons one!’” (p. 126).
- As I instruct my first year preaching students (who preach only on texts from the four gospels), I must help them better to understand that “the authors of the four Gospels do not invite the preacher to treat their brilliant assembling of the events in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection as if they were collection of unconnected texts” (p. 232). I must help them wrestle more thoroughly with the context and themes of the entire book from which they are preaching.
- As I instruct my second year preachers on the unique challenges of preaching from the epistles, I want to help them to understand that they can only preach from the letters faithfully when they keep the context and key emphases of the whole letter in mind as they preach on any part. In

particular, they dare not divorce the sanctification encouragements of Paul's letters from their gospel source and power. Paul did not intend to write an eight-week sermon series when he wrote Philippians. He wrote a letter that would be heard and digested whole, not in parts. If we lose sight of this, we distort a proper law and gospel distinction and quickly end up preaching "naked law" (p. xiii-xiv, see also in particular p. 237). Without intending to, such carelessness in preaching sanctification ends up allowing "legalism [to creep] in even when we think we have avoided it" (p. 59).

- Finally, I must help my students understand what a "relevant" sermon truly is (p. 60-61). Relevance is not a subjective feeling in the hearts of hearers. Relevance corresponds objectively to a message that faithfully and contextually applies that text's message of sin and grace to the hearts and lives of God's people. The pressure will always be on the pulpit to produce sermons that are "faithful" to the wishes of the hearers rather than being truly faithful to the message of Him whose love for his hearers knows no bounds. Only the latter is truly relevant.

The first question we need to ask is not, "Was it relevant?"; "Did I find it helpful?"; or "Were we blessed?"; but "How did the study (the sermon) testify to Christ and his gospel as the power of God for salvation (p. 62).