PREACHING CHRIST FROM ECCLESIASTES

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Foundations for Expository Sermons

SIDNEY GREIDANUS

To our grandchildren:

Jeremy & Julie, Jeffrey, Cara & Peter, and Caitlin

Zachari, Anna, and Jessica, and

Mikayla, Solomon, and Katherine

May the "goads and nails" (Ecclesiastes 12:11)

of the Teacher's wisdom

provide direction, stability, and security for your lives.

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Preface

In 1976, while a pastor in Delta, British Columbia, I preached a series of sermons on Ecclesiastes. After hearing one of these theocentric sermons, a retired pastor approached me and said, "I appreciated your sermon, Sid, but could a rabbi have preached your sermon in a synagogue?" I was dumbfounded by the question, but it set me to thinking about the issue of Christocentric preaching. Of course, a rabbi and I have the Old Testament in common. Moreover, since wisdom is a reflection on "customary 'orders' in the world" (see Chapter 1), the message of wisdom literature would be the same for the church as for the synagogue. So yes, a rabbi could have preached that sermon in a synagogue without causing offense. But if that was the case, had I preached an "Old Testament sermon" instead of a "Christian sermon"?[1] Should not my sermons on Old Testament passages reflect that these passages now function in the context of the New Testament? Should not the sermons of Christian preachers be distinctively Christian?

Some twenty years later I had the opportunity to research this question in depth. The result was the book *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method.* I concluded that sermons based on Old Testament passages cannot merely be theocentric sermons but must be Christocentric. The Church Fathers knew this well but unfortunately adopted allegorical interpretation to accomplish the Christocentric focus. For example,

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1. This is Edmund Clowney's profound distinction: "The Christian proclamation of an Old Testament text is not the preaching of an Old Testament sermon." *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 75. Cf. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 195: "The ultimate concern of the preacher should be to preach the meaning of the text in relation to the goal of all biblical revelation, the person and work of Christ. Can I maintain my integrity as a Christian preacher if I preach a part of the Bible as if Jesus had not come?"

they preached the frequent refrain in Ecclesiastes to enjoy eating and drinking as partaking of the Lord's body and blood in the Eucharist. And Ambrose, preaching on "a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Eccl 4:12), linked it to the Trinity.[2] Today we can no longer with integrity use allegorical interpretation to obtain Christocentric interpretation. Applied to genres other than allegory, allegorical interpretation is arbitrary and subjective; it subverts the intention of the biblical author.

But how, then, does one preach Christ from wisdom literature which does not contain a promise of the coming Messiah and only rarely a type of Christ? Especially with wisdom literature in mind, I broadened the definition of preaching Christ. The common definition is to preach the person and/or work of Christ. Since the work of Christ is frequently restricted to the atonement, I broadened the definition of preaching Christ by adding the category of the *teaching* of Christ. Jesus himself highlighted the importance of his teaching when he said, "If you continue in my word [teaching], you are truly my disciples" (John 8:31). He underscored the significance of his teaching when he sent out his followers with the mandate: "Go . . . make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . , and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). Subsequently, John writes, "Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son" (2 John 9). Hence I defined "preaching Christ" as "preaching sermons which authentically integrate the message of the text with the climax of God's revelation in the person, work, and/or teaching of Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament."[3]

Based on my study of the New Testament and church history, I concluded that there are seven legitimate ways to move from an Old Testament message to

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2. Longman, *Book of Ecclesiastes,* 30-31. Svend Holm-Nielsen, "On the Interpretation of Qoheleth in Early Christianity," *VT* 24/2 (1974) 175, states: "Hieronymus' understanding of Qohelet is based on the same principles as his interpretation of Biblical texts . . . in the Old Testament . . . , the *interpretatio literalis* and the *interpretatio spiritualis.* But it should be remembered that the *spiritualis* . . . is equal to a Christological interpretation." Even today preachers are tempted to use allegorical interpretation to preach Christ from Ecclesiastes. For example, Parsons, "Guidelines," *BSac* 160 (2003) 300, mentions a wedding sermon where the threefold cord of Ecclesiastes 4:12 was preached as the bride, the groom, and Christ. Cf. Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, *Commentary on the Holy Bible,* Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960 reprint), p. 413: "Two together are a three-fold cord; where two are closely joined in holy love and fellowship, Christ will by his Spirit come to them, and make the third, as he joined himself to the two disciples going to Emmaus; then there is a threefold cord that can never be broken." Preachers have also preached the passage about sending out your bread upon the waters (Eccl 11:1) as sending out Christ, the Bread of Life, upon the waters (see Percy P. Stoute, "Bread upon the Waters," *BSac* 107 [1950] 223).

3. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament,* 10.

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Jesus Christ in the New Testament. They are redemptive-historical progression, promise-fulfillment, typology, analogy, longitudinal themes, New Testament references, and contrast. Depending on the text, preachers can use one or more of these ways to preach Christ.

I have written this book primarily for preachers, seminary students, and Bible teachers. My aim is to encourage and help busy preachers and teachers proclaim the messages of Ecclesiastes. This book will enable them to uncover rather quickly the important building-blocks for producing sermons and lessons from Ecclesiastes: the literary unit which is the preaching text; the message for Israel (the textual theme); the response sought from Israel and by analogy from the church today (the goal); the various ways of linking the textual theme to Jesus Christ in the New Testament; the sermon theme and goal; and relevant biblical exposition of all verses in the passage.

Preachers may wish to use this book to preach a series of sermons on Ecclesiastes. I suggest a series of seven sermons on the first half of Ecclesiastes (1:1–6:9) to be followed later by a series of seven sermons on the second half (6:10–12:8) plus one on the Epilogue (12:9-14). Or one can opt for three series of five sermons each. Bible teachers may wish to work their way through Ecclesiastes in fifteen lessons, assigning to their students only the reading of the "Sermon Exposition" section of each chapter.

Readers will notice that I follow the same basic pattern for each passage. This pattern is based on the ten steps from text to sermon I developed for first-year seminary students (see Appendix 1). The resulting repetition in each chapter is intended to inculcate a basic hermeneutical-homiletical approach to the biblical text. First we seek to identify the boundaries of the literary unit and check its context. Next we analyze important literary features that help us sketch the structure (flow) of the text. After noting where and how the text speaks of God, we seek to formulate the textual theme and goal. With this theme in mind, we can brainstorm how each of the seven roads could possibly lead from this text's message to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. At that point we are ready to formulate the sermon theme, goal, and need addressed (the problem, the target) and consider the sermon form. I conclude each chapter with a major section on "Sermon Exposition."

In this "Sermon Exposition" section I seek to provide a model for the sermon by using oral style[4] as much as possible and giving the verse reference *be-*

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4. Oral style is marked, among other characteristics, by short sentences, active voice, short but vivid words, strong nouns and verbs, concrete language, narration in the present tense, verse references before the quotation, use of questions to involve the hearers, use of gender-inclusive language without distracting the hearers, and use of repetition and parallelism. See Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson, *Preaching That Connects: Using the Techniques of Journalists to Add Impact to Your Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

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fore the quotation so that the congregation can read along (comprehension is much better when the congregation not only hears but also sees the words). To keep the sermon exposition moving, I have relegated most quotations, complex arguments, and technical details to the footnotes. Although I comment on every verse in the text, in preparing sermons preachers may have to be more selective in order to avoid information overload. I have indicated where in the exposition and how I might make the move(s) to Christ in the New Testament. These moves are intended only as suggestions; while writing the actual sermon, preachers may be guided by the Spirit to better ways and places in the sermon to move to Christ. Finally, related to the goal and the need addressed, I make brief suggestions for application. In actual sermons, these applications will need to be fleshed out with illustrations and concrete suggestions appropriate to the situation of the congregation being addressed. In the appendixes I have included an expository sermon model, a meditation on Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, and a sermon on Ecclesiastes 9:1-12.

Unless otherwise noted, the Bible version quoted is the NRSV (it follows the Hebrew more closely than the TNIV does). In these quotations I have occasionally emphasized words by italicizing them. Without notation, every reader will understand that these are *my* emphases since they are neither in the original Hebrew nor in the NRSV. The various transliterations of Hebrew words have been standardized as indicated on the chart on p. xvii. In quoting other authors I have also regularized the different transliterations of the Hebrew name "Qohelet" but have kept the author's preferences in the titles of their books and articles.

I have kept references in the footnotes to a minimum: full references can be found in the Bibliography. When a book or article is not included in the Select Bibliography, complete information is found in the footnote.

I send out this book like "bread upon the waters" (Eccl 11:1), with the hope and prayer that it may stimulate many preachers to preach on the frequently neglected book of Ecclesiastes in order to help people live their daily lives wisely and joyfully to the glory of God.

Grand Rapids, Michigan   Sidney Greidanus

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Abbreviations

AUSS	*Andrews University Seminary Studies*
BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
Bib	*Biblica*
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CTJ	*Calvin Theological Journal*
CQ	*The Congregational Quarterly*
ETL	*Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*
EvRT	*Evangelical Review of Theology*
EvQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
Int	*Interpretation*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JHS	*Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JQR	*Jewish Quarterly Review*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
n(n).	footnote(s)
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTT&E	*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*
p(p).	page(s)

Abbreviations

par.	parallels
PSBul	*Princeton Seminary Bulletin*
RB	*Revue Biblique*
rpt.	reprint
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*
TNIV	Today's New International Version
TSFBul	*Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin*
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
v. (vv.)	verse(s)
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	*Vetus Testamentum Supplements*

Transliterations

Hebrew

א = ʾ	ו = w	כ, ך = k	ע = ʿ	שׂ = ś
ב = b	ז = z	ל = l	פ, ף = p	שׁ = š
ג = g	ח = ḥ	מ, ם = m	צ = ṣ	ת = t
ד = d	ט = ṭ	נ, ן = n	ק = q	
ה = h	י = y	ס = s	ר = r	

No distinction is made between the *bgdkpt* with or without the dagesh lene.

Compare: תּוֹרָה = *tôrâ*   הַתּוֹרָה = *hattôrâ*   תּוֹרָתוֹ = *tôrātô*

Vowels

הָ = â	⸱⸱ = e	וֹ = ô
ָ = ā	ְ = ě (if vocal)	⸱ = ō
ַ = a	ֱ = ě	ָ = o
ֲ = ă	⸱ = i	ֳ = ŏ
ֵ = ē	יִ = î	וּ = û
יֵ = ê		ֻ = u

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