PREACHING CHRIST FROM ECCLESIASTES
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.
Contents

PREFACE x

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xiv

ABBREVIATIONS xv

TRANSLITERATIONS xvii

1. Preaching Ecclesiastes 1
   The Value of Preaching Ecclesiastes 2
   Difficulties in Interpreting Ecclesiastes 3
     The Nature of Wisdom Literature 3
     The Relation of Wisdom to Redemptive History 3
     Contradictions 5
   The Historical Setting of Ecclesiastes 6
     The Author(s) 7
     The Original Recipients 9
     The Date of Composition 10
     The Place of Composition 11
     The Purpose of Ecclesiastes 12
   The Genre and Forms of Ecclesiastes 12
     Reflection 13
     Proverb 13
     Instruction 14
     Autobiographical Narrative 14
     Anecdote 14
     Metaphor 15
     Allegory 15
# Contents

*The Structure of Ecclesiastes*  
- Literary Patterns  
- Juxtapositions  
- The Overall Structure  

*The Overall Message of Ecclesiastes*  

Difficulties in Preaching Ecclesiastes  
- Selecting a Proper Preaching Text  
- Formulating a Single Theme  

*Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*  
- Redemptive-Historical Progression  
- Promise-Fulfillment  
- Typology  
- Analogy  
- Longitudinal Themes  
- New Testament References  
- Contrast  

2. No Gain from All Our Toil  
   *Ecclesiastes 1:1-11*  

3. The Teacher’s Search for Meaning  
   *Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:26*  

4. God Set the Times  
   *Ecclesiastes 3:1-15*  

5. Working in a Wicked World  
   *Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:6*  

6. Working Together  
   *Ecclesiastes 4:7-16*  

7. Worshiping in God’s House  
   *Ecclesiastes 5:1-7*  

8. The Love of Money  
   *Ecclesiastes 5:8–6:9*  

9. How to Handle Adversity  
   *Ecclesiastes 6:10–7:14*  

10. How to Act in a Paradoxical World  
    *Ecclesiastes 7:15-29*
Contents

11. Use Wisdom but Know Its Limitations  
   Ecclesiastes 8:1-17  
   200

12. Enjoy Life!  
   Ecclesiastes 9:1-12  
   219

13. Because of the Harm Inflicted by Folly, Use Wisdom!  
   Ecclesiastes 9:13–10:20  
   239

14. Take Risks Boldly but Wisely!  
   Ecclesiastes 11:1-6  
   260

15. Remember Your Creator!  
   Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:8  
   275

16. Fear God, and Keep His Commandments!  
   Ecclesiastes 12:9-14  
   295

Appendixes

   1. Ten Steps from Text to Sermon  
      311
   2. An Expository Sermon Model  
      313
   3. A Meditation on Ecclesiastes 3:1-15  
      315
   4. A Sermon on Ecclesiastes 9:1-12  
      317

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY  
   326

SCRIPTURE INDEX  
   330

SUBJECT INDEX  
   334

TARGETS FOR SERMONS  
   337

TOPICS FOR SERMONS  
   339
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”? 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,

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. 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.”

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

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).

Preface

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 style4 as much as possible and giving the verse reference be-

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).
Preface

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
Acknowledgments

First of all I would like to thank all the authors of the books and articles listed in the bibliography. Even though they arrived at widely divergent results, without their struggles to understand Ecclesiastes and publishing their findings, this book on preaching Ecclesiastes would not have seen the light of day. Next I need to thank my proofreaders for their excellent work. They are my brother, the Rev. Morris Greidanus, retired pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, MI, and my former students, the Rev. Ryan Faber of Pella, IA, and the Rev. Joel Schroers of Denver, CO. All three carefully read the manuscript and offered many helpful suggestions for improving its contents and clarity. I also appreciate the work of the staff of the Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary library in providing the books and articles needed for this research. I thank also the staff of Eerdmans Publishing Company for competently preparing this book for publication, especially the copy editor of my last three books, Milton Essenburg. Once again I thank my wife, Marie, for her encouragement and for creating a peaceful home and quiet atmosphere where I could fully concentrate on this project. Above all, I am grateful to the Lord for providing daily joy in working on this book and for providing health and strength to see this project through to completion.
### Abbreviations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AUSS</td>
<td>Andrews University Seminary Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBR</td>
<td>Bulletin for Biblical Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bib</td>
<td>Biblica</td>
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<tr>
<td>BSac</td>
<td>Bibliotheca Sacra</td>
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<tr>
<td>BTB</td>
<td>Biblical Theology Bulletin</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTJ</td>
<td>Calvin Theological Journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>CQ</td>
<td>The Congregational Quarterly</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETL</td>
<td>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</td>
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<tr>
<td>EvRT</td>
<td>Evangelical Review of Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EvQ</td>
<td>Evangelical Quarterly</td>
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<td>Int</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>JETS</td>
<td>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JHS</td>
<td>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</td>
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<tr>
<td>JPS</td>
<td>Jewish Publication Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>JQR</td>
<td>Jewish Quarterly Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSOT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSS</td>
<td>Journal of Semitic Studies</td>
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<td>n(n)</td>
<td>footnote(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEB</td>
<td>New English Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICOT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIDOTT&amp;E</td>
<td>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</td>
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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 = '  י = w  ת, י = k  ע = '  ש = š
ב = b  ז = z  ל = l  כ, ש = p  ג = š  ה = t
ד = d  ט = t  י, ד = n  ק = q
ה = h  י = y  ת, י = s  ד = r

No distinction is made between the bgdkpt with or without the dagesh lene.
Compare: הָרְאוּ = tôrâ  הָרְאוּ = hattôrâ  נָרְו = tôrâtô

Vowels

א = å  א = e  א = 0
א = a  א = å (if vocal)  א = 0
א = å  א = å  א = å  א = å  א = å  א = å
א = å  א = å  א = å  א = å  א = å  א = å

xvii