

Expository Preaching and Christo-Promise

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INTRODUCTION

A preacher committed to expository preaching while also convicted to preach Christ may expect to find problems in preaching Old Testament (OT) texts. With a grammatical-historical hermeneutic guiding the exposition, the problem emerges when the presence of Christ in the text is difficult to substantiate. Charles Ryrie vigorously defended one Gospel present in all Scripture, yet concluded that the object of faith in salvation in every age is God.¹ While that is true, is not Christ also necessary to be included as the object of faith in the Gospel (Gal 3:8, 9)?

Yet the apparent absence of the mention of Christ in the OT is not the clear testimony of the New Testament (NT):

- Revelation 19:10: “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit (or concern) of prophecy.”
- Luke 24:27: “beginning in Moses and all the prophets He (Jesus) expounded to them in all the Scripture things concerning himself”

(HCSB).

- 2 Corinthians 1:20: “For everyone of God’s promises is ‘yes’ in Him. Therefore, the ‘Amen’ is also spoken through him by us for God’s glory” (NIV).

Thus prophecy, OT Scripture, and promise, find a central and essential place for Jesus Christ according to the NT.

Willis Beecher recognized the compatibility of the revelation between the testaments when he wrote: “God gave a promise to Abraham, and through him to mankind; a promise eternally fulfilled, and fulfilled in the history of Israel; chiefly fulfilled in Jesus Christ, he being that which is principle in the history of Israel.”²

Dispensational theology also has recognized the centrality of the promise to Abraham (Genesis 12-22). The dispensation of promise introduces promise, which extends throughout the history of the OT until it is fulfilled in the two advents of Jesus Christ in the NT. The addition of law does not revoke the Abrahamic covenant, nor does it cancel the promise (Gal 3:17).

It is the intent of this essay to demonstrate that a *grammatical* interpretation of various OT mentions of promise includes the presence of Christ. It is included as the promise is expressed as progressively unfolding in *history*. The presence of Christ is the result of the author’s intent as the promise is expressed in the text and is capable of being understood at that time in history; whether or not we have indication in the text that characters did understand. This thesis is then the basis of expository preaching.

The essay will demonstrate this thesis by developing four ideas:

1. the definition of promise, the definition of Christo-Promise in the Bible,
2. NT texts that interpret OT passages expressing Chris to-Promise, and
3. an expository study of Genesis 15:1-6, giving expression to Christo-Promise.

PROMISE: A HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATION

While grammatical-historical are principles guiding an expository treatment of a text, they aren’t sufficient to define verbal meaning. E. D.

Hirsch, in *Validity in Interpretation*, proposed a definition: verbal meaning is “a willed-type, which the author expressed (historical) by linguistic symbols (grammatical) and which can be understood by another through symbols (communication).”³ The focus in communication of verbal meaning does not rest on words alone, separately considered, but on a pattern of words considered together as a type of meaning. This pattern can appear in sentences, or in a paragraph, or in complete compositions. In literature, the distinctive pattern is understood as genre.

In biblical types of meaning, promise, and law are related types of God’s communication with Israel. While they are related, they are also distinct types of meaning. A promise is an author’s commitment to act in the future on behalf of the stated recipient.⁴ A promise is fulfilled when the commitment is fully kept with the stated recipient. On the other hand, a law expresses an author’s demand, calling the recipient to commit to act in obedience to the stated obligations. Both are commissive statements, but by distinction, the author or the recipient makes the commitment. We will wait to examine how they are related in biblical revelation.

The definition of promise consists of three traits⁵ of the type of promise:

1. the author’s commitment to act,
2. the recipient with whom the author desires to keep his commitment, and
3. an assurance⁶ that the commitment will be kept as stated.

CHRISTO-PROMISE: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION

Creation

In creation, God spoke in fiat statements and the creation came into existence. None of the intervening acts of creation were included between what God said and what appeared in creation. When God spoke concerning Adam, God said, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule . . . all the earth . . . So God created man . . . He created them male and female. God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth. . .’ (Gen 1:26-28). So in God’s stated resolve to create man, he assigned him the role to partner with God and to mediate his rule over creation. Further, God blessed them with the capacity to reproduce and populate the earth; their life would be mankind’s life.

Fall

In Adam's disobedience to God's word (Gen 2:17 and 3:6), he accepted the serpent's word. As a result, Adam found himself ruled by the serpent as the serpent assumed the role of the "ruler of this world" (John 11:31). No longer did Adam mediate God's rule, and the curse of death passed through Adam to the human race.

History

From all appearances, God faced an impossible dilemma: would he incorporate fallen mankind to partner with him to restore his original creation plan? Or would God act independent of his creation to restore the creation?

In God's pronouncement of the judgment on the serpent, God incorporated Eve and selected offspring to partner with him (3:15). While judgment of the enemy is a necessary beginning to address the problem of evil, but it will not provide for restoration. So there is a selected line of offspring in the genealogies of Genesis 5:1-42 and 11:10-32 that link the choice of Abram to Adam and Eve. As a descendant of Eve, he is called to partner with the LORD (Gen 12:1a-c), and to receive promises of blessings (Gen 12:1d-3a), and a promise to partner with the LORD in mediating blessings to all the nations (Gen 12:3b). The scope of the promises indicates that God's plan would necessarily extend to include Abram's descendants (Gen 12:7, etc.).

The definition of God's Christo-Promise would also include three traits in this type of promise:

1. In particular, God commits himself to bless all the nations—the future tense of this promised commitment has the force of a prophetic future.
2. The partner chosen to mediate these blessings is Abram. He accepted the role when he began to keep the commands and left the Ur of Chaldees (Heb 11:12) by faith.
3. The assurance that God would keep his promise contained both a certainty and a question bringing uncertainty. The certainty rested in God who made the commitment. He is God who created the heavens and the earth by his word. No obstacle had appeared in creation to indicate that his word would not be effectual in completing

his will. That was certain. But in history, his word is challenged by the serpent's word. Further, God included human partners who had fallen under the serpent's rule. Thus the question to be addressed was: would Abram be willing to believe God's word and be able to obey? That question is answered for Abraham in God's test of his love for God (Gen 22:1-18). His willingness to sacrifice Isaac, in spite of his love for him, was answered with God's enhanced promise: "*because you have done this thing, and not withheld your only son, I will indeed bless you . . . all nations of the earth will be blessed by your offspring because you have obeyed my command*" (22:16, 18). God's word included Abraham as a causal link in God's promised commitment.

The question is answered for that generation; but the question remains open to the future. While Abraham was a causal link to future generations, his obedience did not fulfill God's promise. Thus, the certainty of God's promise *necessarily implies* that there will be an ultimate descendent through whom the promise will be fulfilled. Thus the name, Christo-Promise, is chosen from our NT perspective. At the time of its composition by Moses, the promised one is defined as "the descendent through whom all the nations would be blessed."

However, the relationship between *promise* and *law* is also introduced. The *promise* of God assured what in the commitment would be fulfilled. The *law* of God was added to identify the descendant who would be willing and able to obey and thus the one chosen by God to use as the partner (Gal 3:23-24).

The blessing that God promised was progressively unfolded in the life of Abraham's descendants. This may be illustrated in Joshua 10:1-8 as the promise of the land (Gen 12:7) was initially being fulfilled.

1. The LORD promised Joshua: "I have handed them (the five kings) over to you. Not one of them will be able to stand against you (10:8). Then "the LORD fought for Israel" and he caused "the sun to stand still" (10:12-14). "There was no day like it before or after . . . because the LORD fought for Israel" (10:14).
2. Yet "the LORD listened to the voice of man" (10:14). Joshua and his men fought as partners in the battle. They pursued the enemies and

executed the five kings (10:16-27). This dual causation is consistent with what G. B. Caird described: “In the Bible, predestination is never confused with determinism, God’s appointments have absolute performative force, but this causal power never dispenses with human response.”⁷

3. The assurance of the promised conquest appeared to Joshua when “the commander of the LORD’s army” (Joshua 5:14, 15) met Joshua before any of the battles began. This brief encounter with the armed man suggested that he was none other than the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ.⁸ This was God’s assurance plan to Joshua that the promise would be accomplished.

AN ANTICIPATION OF JESUS CHRIST AS PRESENT IN OT PROMISE TEXTS

The investigation we want to pursue is based on an exposition of OT texts but read from the perspective of the completed revelation. However, the investigation wants to avoid unwarranted reading in NT meaning into OT texts. Such warrant involves grammatical and historical features found in the OT texts.

Two passages anticipate a Coming One following the creation and the fall of Adam from his role as partner and mediator.

First, the creation was formed to be largely self-sustained. Plants were seed-bearing so as to reproduce for the next season. Likewise, birds, fish, animals, and Adam and Eve were promised with the blessing to reproduce offspring in kind (Gen 1:26-28). However, when they transgressed, the offspring received a fallen life of sin, destined to die. Paul drew the following implications based on God’s promises in creation: “Death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin in the likeness of Adam’s transgression. He is a *type* of the Coming One” (cf. Rom 5:14 CSB).

Second, the word of creation has also directed man to rule over creation on behalf of God (Gen 1:26-28). Following Adam’s fall, Adam was ruled by the serpent and lost the mediated rule entrusted to him. As already indicated, God promised to Eve and entrusted to the chosen ones of her offspring a position of conflict with the serpent which would ultimately be resolved by one offspring (he, him) with the serpent (Gen 3:15c).

Paul identified that ultimate offspring with Jesus Christ. “When the time came for completion, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal 4:4). It seems unnecessary to identify the offspring as “born of a woman,” since every offspring is born of a woman. So Paul’s point is to allude to Genesis 3:15c. He was born to be struck in conflict with the serpent, “to redeem those under the law so that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Gal 4:5).

In the fallen world that followed, in time God’s word of *promise* addressed a chosen partner, and was the principle means by which God would restore the creation and bring it to fulfillment according to the creation design. That plan of restoration began with the word of promise addressed to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. This initial passage will be considered when we exposit Genesis 15:1-6. However, the *promise* to Abraham as originally spoken continued until Abraham’s faith is tested in Genesis 22:1-18, which Hebrews 11:19 comments on. F. F. Bruce interprets the verse in Hebrews: “And in fact, so far as Abraham’s resolution is concerned, Isaac was as good as dead, and it was practically from the dead that he received him back when his hand was arrested in mid-air and the heavenly voice forbade him to proceed further. He received him back from the dead, says our author, ‘in a figure’ meaning, probably, in a manner that prefigured the resurrection of Christ.”⁹

On the *promise* to David that the LORD would build his house (2 Sam 7:11b-16), the promise of a hope of an eternal house was referred to by David in Psalm 16:10. While there is debate about the interpretation, Peter interprets the verse as talking about a soon resurrection, before the body would see decay (Acts 2:31). David had died; he had not been resurrected yet, since his grave remained to that day. The promise in Psalm 16:10b referred ultimately to Jesus and his resurrection, since the apostles were witnesses of the fact (2:32). While David spoke of *Messiah*, in the progress of revelation, Peter preached *Jesus*, whom God intended to refer to, his anointed heir. Through the resurrection of Jesus, David’s house would be established forever, as promised.

In addition to *promise*, God added *law*. It was not to replace promise but to direct Israel to One coming who would partner with God in *promise*. This Coming One would enable God to keep his commitment to bless all nations through his partner. The Coming One would also resolve the intention of

the *law*. Caird focused on the issue: “Many performatives depend for their effectiveness (but not for their validity) on a response. An order does not produce the intended results unless it is obeyed; otherwise it will only have the unintended, though possibly foreseen, effect of rendering its recipient disobedient” (Rom 5:20).¹⁰ In revealing the law to Israel, God had the right to hold her accountable under law and it was valid for God to judge Israel for her transgressions. Yet the Mosaic Law would only be effective in the intended purpose (Exod 19:5, 6), if some partner were willing and able to obey fully. So the law was effectively realized as Jesus shared that intended promise: “Don’t assume that I’ve come to destroy the law and the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Matt 5:17 HCSB). The law was never expected to be fulfilled through a fallen people. Rather, the law was expected to be a schoolmaster to reveal Israel’s Messiah (Gal 3:24). Thus, Jesus Christ did not *replace* Israel, but *represented* Israel in her partnership with God. So Israel was the covenant partner (Rom 9:4-5), a partnership which was intended to be fulfilled through a coming Offspring.

EXPOSITION OF GENESIS 15:1-6

Genesis 12:1-3 introduces the call of Abram to become God’s partner in the initial promise of restoration. Abram’s response and journeys from Ur are traced and reach an initial climax in Genesis 15:1-6.

The set of promises (12:1d-3) are introduced by three commands: “Go out from your land, your relatives, and your father’s house” (12:1a-c). At first appearance, it might seem like the realization of the promises that follow are contingent upon obedience to these commands. However, there are two reasons why fulfillment of the promises is not contingent on obedience.

First, the scope of what God committed to do in the promises far exceeds what obedience would accomplish. So obedience is related to receiving what God promised but only God who made the commitment could bring about all that was promised.

Second, he left his land and many in his extended family by faith (Heb 11:8-9); but brought his father, Terah, and his relative, Lot. So at best, it can be said that he obeyed *some* of what God had commanded. Stephen described what God did: “God had him move to the land you now live in”

(Acts 7:4b, HCSB). Included in “God had him move” was the taking of Terah in death and the orchestrating of Lot to be separated from Abram.

At issue in Abram’s obedience is his acceptance of partnership with God. So after Abram left the Ur of Chaldees, he began a journey in developing faith as God effectually drew him through experiences that he faced by faith in the journey.

Following Abram’s bringing blessing on Lot and the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah by delivering them from Chedorlaomer and his allies, the Lord addressed Abram with promise. “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield and your reward will be very great” (Gen 15:1). Abram immediately focused on reward since he and Sarah still had no descendants after some twenty-five years. While he believed God to deliver his nephew, he wavered in unbelief that they would ever have an heir. In fact, he had a plan worked out in his own mind that Eliezer of Damascus, a chosen servant in his household, would be his heir. And yet that hope was not as satisfying as having a son who would be his heir (15:2-3). Thus he raised a question about the promise of reward.

Then “the word of the Lord came to him: “This one will not be your heir; instead, one who comes from your own body will be your heir” (15:4). The word took Abram from confidence in his plan to place the focus of his faith on what God explicitly promised, developed from what had formerly been implied. And Abram believed God in spite of his advanced age and the deadness of Sarah’s body. He believed in the Lord to resurrect from the dead. This offspring would be the one through whom the promise of blessing all nations would be fulfilled. That’s what God had promised. Moses then summarized the conclusion: “Abram believed God and he credited (the faith) to him as righteousness” (15:6). Paul commented on this passage twice. In Romans 4:3-5, he uses Abraham as an example of justification by faith. In Galatians 3:8, he quotes the promise in Genesis 12:3b as the Gospel. In both cases, the promise includes an implied reference to Christ, which is the object of faith, since that is what God promised. Thus, this is a *Christo-Promise*, a promise of “the offspring through whom all nations would be blessed.”

CONCLUSION

The title *Christo-Promise* seeks to represent the *intention-directed revelation* of the OT. *Promise*, having the force of a prophetic-future, speaks to God's intent to restore and bless the fallen creation. That restoration includes both the restoration of mankind's relationship to God and the restoration of mankind's mediating role of rule in God's will in the creation. It is God's stated commitment in promise that certifies the believer's hope.

Christo speaks to the ultimate One through whom fulfillment of the promise would appear, since God has entrusted the outworking of his plan to chosen ones from the human race. That partnership had been introduced in creation and then was continued after the fall. But this raised a question: how could chosen men that were also fallen adequately partner with God? A restoration that is certain because it is based on God's promise, would necessarily *imply* a Coming One from God who is identified as human and divine—*Christo*.¹¹ His partnership with God would not replace those called from the human race, Israel, but would represent them that they might realize the role to which they were called.

With this understanding of OT revelation, expository preaching guided by a historical-grammatical hermeneutic ought to be pursued. In this pursuit, many texts will naturally speak of historical figures, who anticipate what only Christ will accomplish. And the anticipation is fashioned by a context of promise or of promissory covenants.

Further, *Christo-Promise* necessarily includes Christ in the one Gospel. So the Gospel message is one, calling for faith in God who made the promise and in Christ who assured that it would be realized. In the progress of revelation, what is known of Christ is always true but is more fully understood as more is revealed.

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (rev. ed.; Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 134.

² Willis J. Beecher, *Prophets and Promise* (reprint ed., 1905; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 178.

³ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 49 (clarification added).

⁴ G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 7-36.

⁵ Hirsch, when a "person has learned the characteristics of the type, he can 'generate' those characteristics..." These characteristics are traits of the type meaning: "An implication belongs to a meaning as a trait belongs to a type ... there is only one way the interpreters can know the characteristics of the type; he must learn them," 66.

⁶ "Promise n. a declaration assuring what one will promise – tr. To pledge or offer assurance one will or will

not do something, vow." *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2nd ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985), 991.

⁷ Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 24.

⁸ Joshua bowed down before Him with his face to the ground to worship Him. He then spoke as the One who appeared in the burning bush: "Put off your shoe from your foot for the place where you are standing is holy" (5:15).

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 312.

¹⁰ Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 20.

¹¹ The NT reveals that the expectation of an ultimate realization of the partnership is not between two persons, one divine and the other human. Rather, the partnership is realized with One Person with two natures, one fully divine and the other fully human; that is Jesus Christ.