

# Christocentric Preaching<sup>1</sup>

**VERN S. POYTHRESS**

---

**Vern S. Poythress** is Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he has taught for nearly four decades. He earned his PhD from Harvard University and ThD from the University of Stellenbosch. Dr. Poythress has written numerous articles and books such as *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (P&R, 1999); *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Crossway, 2009); *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Crossway, 2012); *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Crossway, 2012); *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God* (Crossway, 2016); and *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (Crossway, 2018).

## **ABSTRACT**

The principle of *sola scriptura*, when applied to church officers and to preaching, implies that preachers are given authority by Christ to proclaim and teach the content of Scripture, but not to add to or subtract from that content. This limitation constrains the content of preaching and teaching, but leaves much freedom with respect to form and selection of texts and topics at any particular time and place. As part of the total process of teaching, we can affirm the value of grammatical and historical study, study of human spiritual and moral examples, study of the process of redemption leading to Christ, study of types and analogies with Christ, study of the nature of God, and more.

When we apply these principles to Genesis 15:1-6, it follows that we can have many kinds of study of the passage. We take into account its literary place in Genesis 15 and in the whole of Genesis; we take into account the historical setting of patriarchal times. We take into account themes that link the work of God in Genesis 15:1-6 to the climactic work of Christ—themes like promise and fulfillment, blessing, offspring, inheritance, fear,

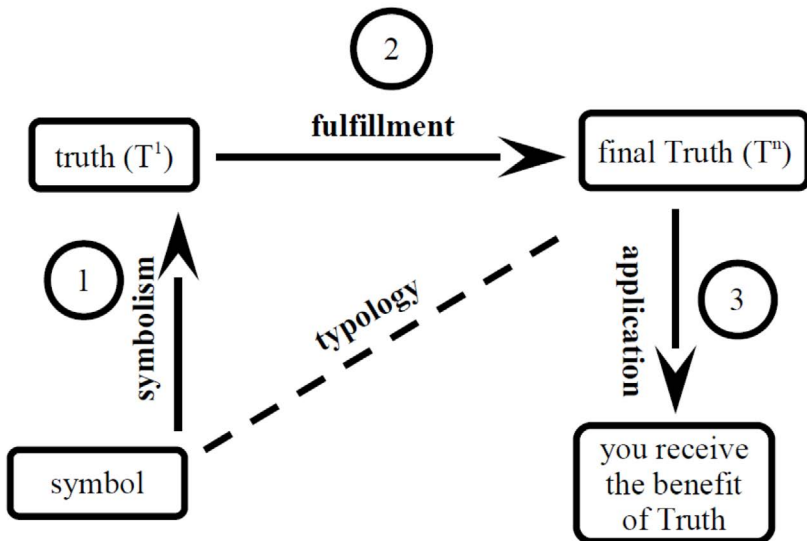
and protection. All these are linked together by their coherent, mutually reinforcing presence in Genesis 15:1-6. The centrality of Christ in the life of the NT church implies his centrality in the preaching and teaching of the church. But there may be a spectrum of ways through which this centrality is wisely expressed and maintained.

I appreciate being invited to contribute to a discussion of expository preaching, using Genesis 15:1-6 as an example.

### A HOMILY USING EDMUND CLOWNEY'S TRIANGLE

Let us begin with a short homily on Genesis 15:1-6. This homily illustrates the use of Clowney's triangle of typology, which represents a two-step process: finding the meaning of a symbol (S) in its own time (truth T<sup>1</sup>), and then discerning how the truth is fulfilled in Christ (truth T<sup>n</sup>).<sup>2</sup> Application is best worked out as a third step, after discerning the role of Christ. (See fig. 1.1.)

**FIG. 1.1: EDMUND CLOWNEY'S TRIANGLE, SUMMARIZING STEPS FOR TYPOLOGICAL REASONING<sup>3</sup>**



## PROCLAIMING THE WORD

<sup>1</sup> After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” <sup>2</sup> But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” <sup>3</sup> And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” <sup>4</sup> And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” <sup>5</sup> And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” <sup>6</sup> And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15:1-6)<sup>4</sup>

In this life, what grips you? What grabs your attention and energy? Abraham was concerned to have a son who would be his heir. That concern does not necessarily strike us as gripping. So what grips you? What grips me? The desire for happiness? Family? Achievement at work? Increase in knowledge? Many of us know that the right answer should be something like “God himself” or “the glory of God.” But that might not be the same as what *actually* grips our attention and desire. Whatever good things we may experience in this world are gifts from God. They are tokens and expressions of his blessing. At their best, they express personal communion with God, and we experience the presence of God through them. But in sin we are tempted to seize the gifts apart from the Giver.

Abraham belongs to a culture different from our own, but at a fundamental level his desires are the same. A son who is an heir is a blessing from God. It betokens *the* fundamental blessing, communion with God: “I will be your God” (see Gen 17:7-8). A line of descent offers a shadowy symbol of ongoing life. The ongoing life represents Abraham’s life blood, extending from generation to generation. It is a shadow of eternal life, in communion with the living God, the God who is the fountain of life. Moreover, in Abraham’s case his offspring is special. God’s promises in Genesis 12:2 and 13:15-16 already suggest that Abraham’s offspring is also the offspring of the woman. Through this line definitive, climactic salvation will come.

How will you have communion with God, the God of all life? How will Abraham? How could God bring it about for you and me? How—when

we, like Abraham, are doomed to die because of our sin? It is by God speaking and promising: God says, “Your very own son shall be your heir” (15:4). God who knows the inmost heart knows the question behind Abram’s question. He understands the feeling of impossibility. It is as if he says, “Come outside, Abraham. I want to show you something.”

“Come outside, Christian, I want to show you something.” “Look toward heaven.” In the silence of the night, in the countryside, what do you see? Stars. Many of them. It is magnificent. They testify from age to age about the power and beauty and magnificence of the one whom made them (Ps 19:1-2). Their numbers testify to abundance of God’s power, his power to multiply and make fruitful. The stars of heaven link us symbolically to the reality of heaven and the one who dwells there. Each star links us to the beauty and brightness and purity and abundant power of God. The stars thereby represent communion with God. God says to Abraham, I grant you blessing, beyond the bounds of earth. Blessing that signifies the reality of communion with God. The blessing of a son. But not one son only. A multitude. A multitude testifying to the fruitfulness of God, analogous to the multiplication of stars. The blessing of communion with God is such that it multiples and deepens beyond calculation.

The name of “Isaac” means “he laughs” (Gen 21:3, 6). Envision laughter, the laughter of joy from God, multiplying beyond Isaac up to the stars of heaven, to uncountable joy, joy “inexpressible and filled with glory” (1 Pet 1:8). “So—” says God, “so shall your offspring be” (15:5). God promises fullness of joy, overflowing life, life forevermore (Ps 16:11).

The promise of God is as if God took a star, a star symbolizing heavenly presence, and brought it down for us. He brought it down by putting words of promise in our ear, so that we could absorb it, as if to eat it with our own mouth. The promise expresses the light of God. He brought down light in the form of a son to Abraham.

And so he did in the climax of history. God, the eternal light (1 John 1:5), sent God of God, light of light, down to the earth, and he became man, “which we looked upon and touched with our hands” (1 John 1:1). The Son and heir is our Lord Jesus Christ. “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14). The morning star (Rev 22:16) has come to us, the Son and “the heir of all things” (Heb 1:2), “the radiance of the glory of God.”

Here is fullness of life, fullness of joy—in him. Believe what God has said, as Abraham did. Reject the folly of the world. Believe, in order that you may participate in eternal life, the life in communion with God through this Son. In him you inherit communion with God, and with that communion all that is God's. Abandon the grip of this world, to lay hold of God and his life in his Son.

### **EXPLORATION OF SIGNIFICANCE**

We could use the whole article to give an expository sermon on Genesis 15:1-6. But in the context of a larger discussion of expository preaching, a choice like that would leave many questions. So we are going to discuss the principles guiding interpretation and preaching, with Genesis 15:1-6 as an example. Given the space limitations, we must be sketchy; we cannot explore full justifications.

### **QUALIFICATIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS**

At the outset, let me include two qualifications.

First, I believe in Christocentric preaching in a certain sense. But I do not consider myself a typical representative of that approach,<sup>5</sup> for reasons that will appear. I may disappoint those who expect a robust defense of a classical understanding of Christocentric preaching.

Second, I do not endorse Christomonism, under which I include two defective approaches: (1) the strategy of preaching *only* on Christ incarnate, and (2) the strategy of preaching Christ apart from the context of the Father and the Spirit. A restriction to the incarnate Christ is in tension with the NT teaching about his pre-existence. What about the issue of the Trinity? The work of Christ takes place as the execution of the plan of the Father, by his anointing, in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38). Accordingly, Christ-centered interpretation and Trinity-centered interpretation should be seen as two sides of the same coin.

Let us expand a bit on the complementary relation between being Christ-centered and being Trinity-centered. We know Christ in the context of knowing the Father and the Spirit, through the power and illumination of the Spirit of Christ, who proceeds from the Father (John 15:26). Proper

understanding of Christ naturally includes the Trinity. So the approach we are considering might be called Trinity-centered preaching. Rightly understood, Christocentric preaching is also necessarily Trinity-centered preaching.

Conversely, Trinity-centered preaching is Christ-centered. Trinity-centered preaching ought to acknowledge the centrality and pre-eminence of Christ and his work in the redemptive reconciliation to God, who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Knowledge of the Father and the Spirit is mediated by the words and work of the Son.<sup>6</sup>

This mutuality involving Christ as center and the Trinity as center is confirmed by the examples of apostolic preaching in Acts. Pre-eminently, the apostles expound Christ and his work. But their exposition includes attention to God in his trinitarian work, as illustrated by the reference to the Father and the Spirit in Acts 2:33:

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he [Jesus] has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

The same holds for the instruction found in the NT letters (e.g., 1 Cor 2:2; Ephesians 1; 2 Tim 3:15; 1 Peter 1; 1 John 1).

### **FREEDOM IN PREACHING, WITHIN LIMITS**

To provide a framework for assessing preaching, let us now briefly take up the topic of freedom and constraint in preaching. The only constraints should be scriptural.

We should hold to a principle of sola scriptura for ethics. No extra ethical principles have to be added to the canon of Scripture in order for Christian living to be complete. One can see this principle of sufficiency of

Scripture in Psalm 119:1:

Blessed are those whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the law of the LORD!

Does someone want to be blameless? The only thing that he needs to do is

to “walk in the law of the LORD.” Nothing else needs to be added.

The principle also applies to officers of the church, as can be seen from 2 Timothy 3:16-17. The famous passage about the breathing out of Scripture by God ends with the goal: “that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (v. 17). The phrase “man of God” focuses on those responsible for ministry of the word. Scripture is sufficient to make them “competent.”

Attempts to add to Scriptural commands most often end up in the long run unintentionally undermining Scripture, as Jesus observes in his critique of tradition in Mark 7:6-9:

And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,  
but their heart is far from me;  
in vain do they worship me,  
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!”

The basic principle governing church officers, including preachers, is that they have no genuine *legislative* authority, but only *executive* authority. They cannot rightly legislate; that is, they cannot invent extra ethical principles and bind the people of God to them; neither can they annul the rules of Scripture or implications deducible from Scripture. Rather, they are given the responsibility of carrying out what God has already said (executive authority).

Now this principle of sufficiency has implications for expository preaching. The preacher or teacher must teach the teaching of Scripture. He is not authorized to add or subtract. When he speaks the word of God, which it is his duty to do, his words have authority derivative from God. But only then. In sum, this means that he is authorized to teach “the whole counsel of God” in a sense similar to Acts 20:27. That is the main constraint on preaching.

There is also freedom in preaching, as an implication of the Reformation doctrine of the freedom of the Christian man. How so? The principle of *sola scriptura* also governs *how* the preacher does his preaching. Scripture does not command us to use just one style. So in fact there is vast freedom for the teacher to use his God-given wisdom as to just how he expresses and conveys teaching. He may use verbal illustrations; he may use blackboard or slides. At a particular time or place, he may expound the teaching of the whole Bible by topic; he may expound the meaning and implications while focusing on a single passage like Genesis 15:1-6. He may focus on explaining the relations of one or two passages in Genesis to the whole of Genesis. He may explain how, in the context of the whole canon, an OT passage has links forward to the work of Christ on earth. All of these approaches and more may operate within the general task of teaching the whole counsel of God.

Of course in the long run, in the case of a person who preaches or teaches regularly, he should consider also whether his teaching is balanced and avoids always returning to a few pet topics or pet verses.

### **THE PLACE OF EXPOSITORY PREACHING**

Now, within this framework, what about expository preaching? What is it? To some extent, people may operate with different definitions and different conceptions. At the very broadest, it might mean only that the content of teaching is orthodox and is built on canonical content. This constraint is the one already mentioned, concerning “the whole counsel of God.” But often expository preaching is considered more narrowly. It often means focusing on expounding one verse or one passage from the Bible. This latter sense is one way, but only one, of carrying out the task of teaching.

If we were to say that it is the only way or the best way, that would be a matter of human tradition. We may indeed affirm that it is a tradition with wisdom and it can serve to instruct aspiring preachers. The principal people who advocate expository preaching do not themselves claim that single-text preaching is absolutely the only way to preach—only that it is generally preferable. In particular, they offer it as wise counsel for young men who are still gaining their feet with the practice of preaching. With that understanding we may agree. But we should nevertheless remember



the principle of *sola scriptura*. It implies that the tradition as such has no exclusive claim on us, as the only proper way to teach the word of God. No passage in Scripture restricts preachers to this method. And a restriction of this sort is contradicted by the sermons in Acts and by the NT letters, none of which is exclusively focused on expounding one OT verse or passage.

Our focus on exposition is useful. But it produces a danger that we would bring in expectations from tradition about how it ought to be done. The principle of *sola scriptura* for ethics and for the “how,” the method of teaching the word of God, leads to the conclusion that there is not only one way or one method or one technique for having “the word of Christ dwell in you” (Col 3:16), but many. Many ways of teaching may be faithful to the teaching found in Scripture itself. All of these good ways necessarily contrast with heretical and false teaching, as well as with teaching done by people whose lives do not commend their words.<sup>7</sup>

### **CENTRALITY OF CHRIST FOR SPIRITUAL LIFE**

Though there is vast freedom, the Bible shows us the importance of Christ for the long-range spiritual health of the church. There are several motivations for keeping Christ central in the whole life of the church, preaching included.

First, as we have seen, preaching in Acts and the letters in the NT provide examples of the centrality of Christ.

Second, Christ is central in the gospel, which is the central proclamation of the NT. The gospel is both the gospel that Christ proclaimed (Mark 1:15) and the gospel about Christ that the apostles and other early preachers proclaimed (Rom 1:1-3; 1 Cor 15:1-8; Col 1:28). The gospel needs to be central in the church, which is the body of Christ, whose members are those who follow Christ.

Third, the NT indicates that union and communion with Christ is central in salvation and in Christian growth (e.g., 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 1; Col 2:3). Neglecting the centrality of Christ is not responsible and leads to spiritual unhealthiness when the sheep of Christ’s flock are not wisely fed. The centrality of Christ should therefore be continually considered, and should be a regular focus for people who feed the sheep.

Fourth, the NT indicates at various points that the OT is centrally about

Christ. Most prominent is Luke 24:25-27, 44-49, but we may add John 5:39, 45-46; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Hebrews; and 1 Peter 1:10-12. These passages certainly need to be taken into account in our interpretation of the OT. But we do not have time to consider them at length.

The upshot is that Christ should be central in preaching as well. But how? That question returns us to an affirmation of freedom within the boundaries of the whole counsel of God. The interpreter who respects the word of God must respect the many thematic and rhetorical unities that belong to each individual passage. He must also respect the unity that belongs to the whole biblical canon, unity in doctrine, unity in accomplishment of redemption in Christ, and unity in the history of redemption, as progressing through time.<sup>8</sup> Those unities give unity to preaching. But still there is diversity—diversity of passages, and diversity of various aspects of each passage.

#### **AFFIRMATION OF VARIETY**

The unities are perhaps more attended to. So let us take the time to affirm a variety in the ways that we study Scripture. Variety need not be understood as opposed to the centrality of Christ. We can affirm in principle the positive value of a focus on grammatical and historical study of the communication of God through human authors to an ancient audience. That kind of study contributes as one aspect of the whole, that is, the total process of teaching Scripture.

We can affirm the value of a focus on redemptive-historical movement, leading forward to the once-for-all appearing of Christ on earth at the proper historical moment (“the fullness of time,” Gal 4:4). This focus, properly executed, would be a valid form of “Christotelic” exposition. The focus on grammar and language, the focus on history and the immediate historical and social environment, and the focus on redemptive movement forward to Christ represent moments within a rich and complex meditation on the word of God that is addressing us (Rom 15:4).

We treat these various foci as moments within a larger whole. These moments can be isolated from that whole only at the cost of distortion and illusion. In fact, we always have a larger background, hermeneutically speaking, constituted by our previous understandings and assumptions and practices in living, a background that we do not explicitly address, but

which helps to guide our research on a single passage. Truth in Christ is not composed merely of isolated bits, like marbles in a bag.

### **ILLUSTRATION OF VARIETY WITH GENESIS 15:1-6**

We may illustrate with Genesis 15:1-6.

(1) First, it is valid and useful to do a careful study of the words, phrases, and larger linguistic textures of the passage. As one example, after examining the flow of the six verses, we may judge that verse 5 forms a kind of literary peak, with verses 4-6 forming a somewhat broader mountain top. So we try to appreciate how the earlier verses lead up to this peak, and how the peak functions as the main point for the entire episode.

(2) In addition, it is valid and useful to study the historical environment, which includes previous promises to Abram and the social contexts of the time. Included in social context would be the cultural atmosphere of placing value on having sons and having an inheritance to pass on. We may also study how Genesis 15:1-6 fits into a larger context: the further developments and the ceremony in 15:7-21; the section on the generations of Terah beginning in Genesis 11:27; the larger story of early history and the patriarchs found in Genesis as a whole; the context of the Pentateuch; and the context of the history of Israel continuing in Joshua, Judges, and beyond. Because God has a plan from the beginning, we may also consider how all this history leads to Christ. The history includes the promise of offspring, offspring traced through the line of Seth, the line of Noah, the line of Abraham, and the line of David. Genesis 15:5 offers us one point on this developing line.

(3) We also affirm the positive value of meaningful connections between passages, connections in many dimensions, through many themes. So, for example, human beings long ago, in Abram's time, were human like us. They serve therefore as moral and spiritual examples, good and bad and mixed. The climactic example is found in the humanity of Christ. We may ask of a passage, "What are human beings doing, and how are they analogous to Christ and to us?" In Genesis 15:1-6, what do we learn about Abram? We see his faith and also his insecurities and possible doubts, which he brings before the Lord. He is like us. And Christ is the climactic human being who

trusts God with all his heart.

(4) All of the events in the OT are redemptive-historical preparations, along a time line. According to the unfolding plan of God they lead to the coming of Christ. A sermon may choose to focus on this aspect of preparation. Genesis 15:1-6 represents one episode along this long time line. How does it fit into the whole? As father of the faithful, Abram exercises faith, and is the fountainhead for a line of offspring of faith (as in Hebrews 11 and Romans 4). The final offspring and heir is Christ (Gal 3:14, 16, 29).

(5) Since God is always the same God, we affirm a systematic-theological, God-centered approach that focuses on the question, "What is God doing, and what do we learn about him?" The climactic revelation of the character of God is in Christ: John 14:9; Hebrews 1:1-3. In Genesis 15:1-6, God appears as merciful, compassionate, promise-keeping, redemptively active, and miracle-working. He is the same God still today.

(6) We affirm a typological approach that looks for symbols that have meaning in their own historical location and also point forward to a final, climactic realization in Christ. Edmund Clowney has shown how to avoid arbitrariness in treating typology by focusing first on the meaning of symbols in their own time. As a second step, we see how the truth symbolized at an earlier time is further unveiled in Christ.<sup>9</sup> (See fig. 1.1 above.)

How might this approach work with Genesis 15:1-6? The subsequent narrative in Genesis 15:7-21 has more obvious symbolical material than verses 1-6, and nothing about symbolism should be forced. One of the liabilities in the medieval fourfold method was to appear to suggest that we treat every passage of Scripture the same way. To practice such a uniform approach would be to ignore the unique character of genuine symbols and differences in genre.

We may nevertheless suggest that there are elements in Genesis 15:1-6 that have some degree of symbolical overtones. Verse 1 presents us with a vision, which connotes intimacy with God and thus symbolic depth. Verse 2 speaks about offspring and inheritance. In Genesis, physical offspring and inheritance are tokens of blessing in the context of a holistic personal relation to God. They thus betoken also spiritual fruit and spiritual

inheritance. “Your reward” in verse 1 links with the theme of inheritance. “Your shield” in verse 1 functions to guarantee God’s care, and thereby suggests the larger pattern, where God promises to “be God” to Abraham (Gen 17:7, 8). Fruitfulness is suggested in verse 5, as confirmed by 17:6. Covenantal promises are suggested in verse 5, as confirmed by 17:4.

The topic of inheritance in Genesis 15:1-6 goes together with the prospects of ongoing life, beyond a single generation. And so it links us back to the origin of human life and the Garden of Eden. The tree of life in 2:9 (3:22) symbolizes real life in fellowship with God, and thus eternal life (3:22). This eternal life is still a prospect even after the fall, as is made visible by the promise concerning the offspring of the woman (3:15). The tokens of life and blessing that are found in 15:1-6 evoke this larger theme of blessing, which has climactic form in the blessing of eternal life. In verse 5, the stars betoken the power of God. The fact that the stars are used as a central illustration to confirm God’s promise may invite us to slow down and experience more deeply what it means the actually look at stars and be in awe, as would have been Abram’s experience.

A sermon focused on verse 5 could dwell on how Christ brings to fulfillment the covenantal promises in the verse. Christ inaugurates the new covenant (1 Cor 11:25); produces fruitfulness (Isa 53:10-12); receives an inheritance that is also ours when we are in him (Ps 2:8; Rom 8:17; Gal 3:29).

(7) We affirm a fulfillment approach that stresses the superiority and climactic character of the revelation in Christ and the work of God in the earthly life, death, resurrection, ascension, and rule of Christ. So, for example, Christ is heir to the whole world, not simply the land of Canaan. Christ has dominion of over all, not only over animals and land. Christ is fruitful in bringing many sons to glory (and the spiritual fruit is surpassingly glorious, 2 Corinthians 3).

The theme of Christ as fulfillment encompasses the earlier emphases found in covenantal promises. Christ in perfect humanity fulfills earlier human examples. Christ in his work in the fullness of time fulfills the acts of preparation. Christ is God, and as God he climactically manifests the character of God. The cross and resurrection show the mercy and justice and wisdom of the Father. Christ as antitype fulfills the symbols.

(8) We can also consider focusing on themes. The major themes in

Genesis include blessing, offspring (and fruitfulness), and land. They are articulated in terms of promise, waiting/development/trial/threat, and fulfillment. These all have typological functions, in that physical blessings, offspring, and land betoken the centrality of spiritual communion with God. Also, the redemptive plot that consists in the movement from distress to deliverance is typological in its relation to the antitype of redemption accomplished by Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Here in Genesis 15:1-6 are found many of these themes. In particular, the obstacle is that Abram has no proper heir. It is a trial, corresponding to the trials of Christ and of Christians. The answer is given in terms of the character of God and his promises. Near fulfillment is found in Genesis 21, when Isaac is born, after overcoming the threat in Genesis 20. This deliverance is typologically related to the climactic deliverance in the death and resurrection of Christ.

### **Illustrating Christocentricity for a Single Verse**

Having considered themes in Genesis and in the passage 15:1-6, let us now illustrate aspects of Christocentricity at the level of a single verse. Christocentricity belongs to OT verses by virtue of meaning relations with other verses and passages.

Let us consider a less prominent verse with Gen 15:1-6, namely verse 3: “And Abram said, ‘Behold, you have given me no offspring ...’” One way of considering the larger significance of this verse comes from reflecting on why a situation with no offspring comes to exist at all. This verse 3 has a thematic contrast with the fruitfulness promised in Genesis 1:28, which includes offspring by implication: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth ...” What makes the difference between the blessing described in Genesis 1:28 and the situation of frustration in Genesis 15:3? The obvious watershed is the fall of Adam. Given the fall, the favor of God that Abram experiences in 15:1-6, even in the midst of his temporary frustration, is a picture of grace. And Abram’s response to God relies on this grace. Grace solves the demerit from the fall. As a result of the fall, Adam and his descendants lack proper standing before God. God acts to overcome Abram’s lack.

Now grace is possible only through Christ. In Genesis 15:1-6, the

vision, the word of God, and the blessing are all mediated to Abram in a manner that must be consistent with God's justice. Grace is free from the standpoint of Abram's side, but from the standpoint of God it must be consistent with justice. And this requires dealing with demerit by means of substitution.

(This overall context, by the way, excludes the interpretation of verse 6 as if it meant that God accounted Abram's faith as righteousness in an analytic sense, that is, because his faith was itself a righteous act. That interpretation ignores the necessary presence of grace.)

### **PHRASES AND CLAUSES**

Now let us illustrate some ways in which Christocentricity belongs to texts by virtue of relations, at the level of phrases and clauses. In Genesis 15:4, consider the phrase "the word of the LORD." God spoke to Abram. This phrase in context resonates with all the earlier speeches of God to man in Genesis. Ever since the fall, God's speech needs to be mediated to avoid death of the recipient. The mediator is the Son, the Word. Because of the necessity of mediation, we can confidently infer the presence of Christ and his work when God speaks to Abram. Christ's role in Genesis 15:4 anticipates his incarnation and verbal ministry on earth.

Genesis 15:4 also resonates with the speech of God in Genesis 1, which powerfully brings about what it specifies: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3). In like manner, in 15:4-5 the word of God guarantees an heir beforehand and specifies authoritatively the nature of the heir. Both of these kinds of speech, in creation and in covenantal promise, are reflections within time that reflect the archetype, the eternal Word who is spoken by God, expressing the nature of God.

### **EMBEDDING THE WORD OF GOD**

Consider also that the word of God can be embedded in the word of God. Genesis as whole book is the word of God, and in it is embedded the quotation in verse 15:4 from what God said at a particular point in the life of Abraham. Moreover, 15:4 could have included another level of embedding in turn, by quoting from what God said to Abram at Genesis

12:2 or 12:7 concerning Abram's offspring. 15:4 does not elaborate using the exact words of the earlier speeches in Genesis 12, but there is nevertheless an allusion to them. It is a kind of indirect embedding of an earlier divine speech. We may include also God's mention of offspring in 13:15-16.

How does it happen that the word of God can embed the word of God? Embedding of this kind involves a kind of miniature transcendence.<sup>11</sup> Human understanding, as a finite, created imitation of divine understanding, is capable of standing back from immediate involvement in a situation and grasping the whole. In this case, the whole is the earlier oral communication to Abram, which is actually several wholes that are brought together in an act of miniature transcendence.

Now miniature transcendence is possible to mankind because man is made in the image of God. The original, the archetypal image is not man but the divine Son, as seen in Colossians 1:15 and Hebrews 1:3.

Man's thoughts exercising miniature transcendence echo the thoughts of God. And on the divine level the Son is the original image echoing the Father. The word of God can echo the word of God, thereby reflecting the relation of the Father to the Son in the original divine instance of reflection.

Do we perhaps think that these reasoning are a stretch? The divine speech and activity is the archetype on which specific manifestations depend. In creation and providence, God does not depend on eternal abstractions outside himself, but on himself as the absolute origin. Thus there is a genuine relation between the original instance of communication in the relation of the Father to the Son, and ectypal instances in the world.

### **THE THEME OF COMING**

Now let us look again at the expression "came to him" in Genesis 15:4. This expression describes a communication that, figuratively speaking, *moves* from God to man. Note also the particular style of the expression, "the word of the LORD *came* ...," instead of the simply expression, "God said," or "God spoke." The metaphorical idea of movement hints at a differentiation between God who is the origin and the word that comes out from him,



traveling out as a word distinct from the speaker. This differentiation adumbrates the fuller NT revelation of the distinction between God the Father and the Word, the Son.

In Genesis 15:4, a revelation originates in God, which man cannot control or compel, and which is a free act of God. In the situation after the fall, man cannot merit it and indeed has demerit, making communication from God problematic. The coming of the word is a coming of God that is by grace. As such, it anticipates and foreshadows the climactic coming in Christ. As Hebrews 1:1 says,

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets [and, we may add, through Abram, functioning as a prophet in receiving the word, Gen 20:7; Ps 105:15], but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son .... (Heb 1:1-2)

God sent forth his word to Abram. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son ...” (Gal 4:4).

### **CHRISTOCENTRICITY IN A WORD**

Let us now consider the level of individual words. The words, of course, function in interaction with literary context. So a focus on one word, like the earlier choices of focus, never leaves behind context. It would be comparatively easy to take a word like *heir* (Gen 15:2, 3, 4). The general idea of an heir and an inheritance makes sense only against a background defined by ownership and gift. The original of both is to be found in God. God created the world and owns it. Adam receives the world as a gift and is like an heir. He forfeited his position in the fall. Abram’s heirship is a type of the climactic offspring who inherits, namely Christ as the last Adam.

Instead of continuing to reflect on the word *heir*, let us consider a more challenging case, the word *after* used at the beginning of Genesis 15:1 (Hebrew אַחֲרַי). The word *after* functions together with the phrase *these things* to show a chronological link with the preceding chapter. As usual, the word functions in a context that colors its force and function.

What are we to say? Genesis 15 comprises one of a considerable number of episodes unfolding the promises of God to Abraham. First, a promise comes (Gen 12:1-3). Then there is a time of unfolding and development.

And in Genesis we also have the early events in the initial stages of fulfillment. History thus unfolds God's plan of salvation. Meditation on the serious implications of the fall shows that the continuation, that is, the history of redemption, is a kind of miracle and surprise of grace. And this grace, we know, can only be through Christ.

The progressive unfolding in the articulation of promises is shown in the ways that Genesis 15:1-6 adds to earlier articulations to Abram. "Fear not" (verse 1) is new. So is "I am your shield" and "Your reward shall be very great" (verse 1). Yet these promises are not absolutely new. The promises of blessings and care from God in Genesis 12:1-3, 7 and 13:14-17 already should provide Abram comfort in the security of God's promises, and therefore are cause for not fearing. However, making *explicit* the exhortation not to fear is significant encouragement. So also, the promise in 12:3 concerning God's curse on enemies hints that God is Abram's shield. But the explicit statement in 15:1 is more definite. "Organic growth" in revelation is rightly an idea applied to this sequence, and indeed well beyond Genesis into the entire OT period. This growth unfolds on the basis of the grace founded in the work of Christ, a work that is reckoned with beforehand as God blesses fallen people in Genesis.

We can see the role of Christ especially in Revelation 5. Let us focus in particular on the worthiness of the Lamb—the Lamb that has been slain in sacrifice—to take the scroll. Interpreters differ concerning the contents of the scroll. On the basis of parallels with heavenly books in Daniel, we may take it that the scroll is the book laying out God's plan for history, a history of redemption. The plan can unfold, as represented symbolically by the breaking of the seals, only because of the Lamb. We might observe that in Revelation 6 the results of opening the seals are more specialized, not necessarily the entirety of history. That is true. But the principle articulated in the symbolism is general: it concerns the worthiness of the Lamb as the driving center of redemption. This image is applicable beyond the specific details given as results of opening the seals. The principle is applicable, therefore, to the word *after* in Genesis 15:1.

In fact, at a principal level, the unfolding of history is trinitarian. It is according to the plan and initiation of the Father, executed by the Son, and consummated by the Holy Spirit. Doctrinal principle suggests that this execution of history extends not only to core events of redemption, where

it is obvious and most vividly articulated, but concerning the movement from creation to consummation that characterizes the pre-fall situation as well as post-fall.

The actions of God in history reflect the eternal trinitarian relations of action. The Father begets the Son eternally. This eternal begetting has a reflection in the causal unfolding of time on the level of the creature. Thus, the before-and-after structure articulated in the word *after* in Genesis 15:1 reflects the priority and posteriority of begetting and begotten in the Trinity.

All this represents implications of the teaching of the Bible as a whole. General principles concerning the Trinity have salient connections with the particular instances that manifest those principles. The particulars include every one of the once-for-all, never-to-be-repeated particularities of words, phrases, clauses, and paragraphs such as found in Genesis 15:1-6.

The principles, expressing unity in the Bible, and the not-repeated particulars, expressing the diversity in the Bible and in history, are, as Cornelius Van Til argued, equally ultimate.<sup>12</sup> As such, they reflect the equal ultimacy of unity and diversity in God, the one God in three persons. And that expression is necessarily Christocentric, because revelational, mediated by the Son.

## CONCLUSION

The relations between words and context and the relations between passages, when extended to the whole canon and the larger vistas of history, provide resources in which we find many meaning connections that involve the work of Christ. In addition to these sources of meaning, we can affirm the principal importance of Christ in teaching in the church, because of the centrality of Christ in NT preaching and teaching, in the process of sanctification, and in NT affirmations concerning the significance of the OT.

- 
1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 15-17, 2017, in Providence, RI. The paper was part of a larger session, "Expository Preaching and Hermeneutics: Preaching Christ, the Text, or Something Else?"
  2. Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 98-112,

especially 110, where the triangle is found in its original form.

3. From *ibid.*, 110, with some relabeling.
4. All English Bible quotations come from the English Standard Version.
5. For more representative approaches, see, for example, Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*; Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007); Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013); Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); Charles D. Drew, *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). In addition, there are broader discussions of the history of redemption and the centrality of the role of Christ in that history: Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (reprint, Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of Wisdom: A Redemptive-Historical Exploration of the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012). For my own approach, see Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995); Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999).

It is hard to say just how my approach differs, and I do not want to make too much of differences. The main distinctive may well be the presence of explicitly perspectival thinking. I try to incorporate valid insights from other approaches to preaching, and to affirm variety in preaching. In addition, perspectival thinking is at work when I extend Christocentricity not only to every verse, but in principle to every word in every verse.”

6. Thus a focus on Christ offers a *perspective* on the Trinity, and conversely a focus on the Trinity offers a *perspective* on Christ. This use of perspectives follows the pattern discussed in John Frame, “A Primer on Perspectivalism (Revised 2008),” <https://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>, accessed Aug. 31, 2017; and more elaborately in Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (reprint, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) and John M. Frame, *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and its Significance* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017)
7. Note the link between life and teaching in 1 Tim 4:6-16 and other passages.
8. Note, in particular, the focus on the history of redemption and the history of revelation in Vos, *Biblical Theology*.
9. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 98-112.
10. Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chapters 25-26; Vern S. Poythress, *The Miracles of Jesus: How the Savior’s Mighty Acts Serve As Signs of Redemption* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), Part II.
11. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, chapters 11 and 12.
12. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (4th ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 45-51.