

FIVE CONVICTIONS ON PREACHING FOR CONVERSION

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INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to address ‘the entailments of the biblical grasp of conversion for preaching’ or ‘what does the Bible’s teaching on conversion mean for preaching?’¹ The subject of this paper therefore takes us into the realm of ‘implications’—more specifically, the implications a biblical understanding of conversion has for preaching. With that in mind, I offer five convictions as discussion starters to be enlarged, fleshed out, and even challenged, critiqued and corrected.

The first three convictions—“preaching must be done,” “prayers must be made,” and “power understood”—are intended to demonstrate the essential nature of the proclamation of God’s Word² for conversion. The fourth conviction—“present day praxis must be informed”—begins to describe how we can go about the task of proclaiming God’s Word with the effective tools of 1) a robust Biblical theology, 2) a method of contextualization that establishes Biblical

¹ This essay was first prepared as an oral paper titled “The Entailments of the Biblical Grasp of Conversion for Preaching” to be presented at the 2010 Pastor’s Colloquium of the Gospel Coalition, May 18-20, 2010. It was the fourth of four papers on the subject of conversion. The three preceding papers were “The Nature and Necessity of Conversion” by Mark Dever, “The Diversity of Conversion Patterns (Acts)” by Francis Chan, and “Biblically Enshrined Motives in Conversion” by D.A. Carson. I wish to thank the following for their feedback and critique at various stages during both the preparation of that paper and the preparation of this essay: the Elders of Holy Trinity Church in Chicago, Tim Keller, D.A. Carson, Ligon Duncan, Andy Davis, James MacDonald, Francis Chan, Bryan Chappell, and the other Gospel Coalition Council members who gave feedback during the presentation of the paper.

² There is an important distinction between Word ministry as a category and “proclamation” as a specific activity within Word ministry. Peter Adam articulates the distinction as such: “The ministry of the Word in the Bible includes the writing and reading of Scripture, and the use of Scripture in personal exhortation and encouragement as well as in public teaching and preaching. Preaching is best understood as one part of the ministry of the Word, and it derives its theological character from the biblical basis for all aspects of the ministry of the Word.” Adam, Peter. *Speaking God’s Words* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996): 15. In other words, the specific activity of preaching (and all that it entails in the Bible, including elements of authority and restriction as to who may engage in the activity) draws from the more general concept of Word ministry in the Bible. Throughout this essay, elements of Word ministry in the Bible will be discussed as they relate to and inform the modern practice of preaching. While this is the intention of the paper given that it was prepared for presentation to a group of pastors, elements of the discussion will also relate back generally to and inform the broader category of Word ministry.

categories in conjunction with presenting the gospel to the unchurched, and 3) a conscious recognition of the centrality of Christ. The fifth conviction—“training preachers should be our priority” brings into focus the necessity of training Biblical expositors for the growth of the Gospel through conversion.

I. PREACHING MUST BE DONE.

My first conviction is this: The proclamation of God’s Word is God’s way of accomplishing his work in the world, including the work of conversion. The Scriptures everywhere confirm it. From the outset of human history relationship with God has been forged, mediated, and sustained through the proclamation of his Word. And as we will see, this truth is first revealed to us in the Torah and carried on throughout the books of Israel’s history. It takes center stage in the Gospels/Acts and is commended to us in the Epistles. We are charged to it especially in the Pastorals and conclude with it in Revelation.

1. Torah

“And God said...” is what gave birth to life, for the speech of God is a creative act. And so, from the very beginning, God has mediated relationship through the agency of words.³ His words were meant to be proclaimed—and this, even before the fall. In fact, the very first question posed on the pages of salvation history, “Did God actually say...?”⁴ was one that required a sermon. Yet, in this, Adam faltered. By not preaching God’s Word he failed to save his wife from rules (or *religion*) as the means of relating to God.⁵ Likewise, by neglecting proclamation, Adam failed to judge the serpent for making *rebellion* permissible in God’s world. And so, sin and death entered into the world. The one charged to speak followed another voice instead.

God, now without a preacher in the world, became one himself. He took his stand in the garden and proclaimed his gospel of salvation and judgment.⁶ In time God would go to great lengths to ensure that his word was restored to its rightful place in the world. He imparted it to men like Enoch and Noah who thundered it out to all who would listen and believe.⁷ The record of Abraham’s conversion—being accounted righteous by faith—is well attested.⁸ In Exodus God saved his people by the blood of a lamb, carried out in accordance with his word. At Sinai, God’s newly constituted people gathered around God’s Word. Indeed, the very act of faithfully listening to and living under God’s Word came to define what was meant by the act of worship. And at that time, through another act of gracious condescension to human needs, God

³ Genesis 1:3. So too, for God’s work of ‘re-creation’, or conversion. His Speech creates new life, providing the essential grounds for the relationship between preaching and conversion.

⁴ Genesis 3:1

⁵ The nuance here is between Genesis 2:17, wherein God told Adam (before Eve was created) that he should not eat of the tree, and Genesis 3:2, wherein Eve recounts God’s command and adds a second restriction from even touching the fruit. Eve has added to God’s word (cf. Deuteronomy 4:2) and Adam, who was with her (Genesis 3:6), should have intervened to correct the addition. The added restriction amounts to the first instance of *halakha*, or the practice of adding traditional safeguards (equal in status to Biblical safeguards) to prevent even getting close to transgressing Torah. This practice is later judged destructive to the Law by Jesus in Mark 7:1-23.

⁶ Genesis 3:14-19. Adam received God’s garden words by faith—he called his wife Eve because she would be the mother of the living (cf. Genesis 3:20).

⁷ For Enoch’s prophetic word, see Jude 14-16. Also see 2 Peter 2:5 where Noah is called a “herald of righteousness.”

⁸ Genesis 15:6, quoted twice by Paul, once as a demonstration of initial converting faith (Romans 4:1-8) and a second time in the context of sanctification (Galatians 3:1-9).

promised to deposit his words in the mouth of Moses rather than to speak them audibly himself.⁹

2. *Israel's History*

In was in this act of establishing the prophetic office that the calling and converting work of the gospel was now placed firmly into the mouths of preachers. By their proclamation the Spirit went forward saving and strengthening a people for God. Joshua reconstituted God's family under God's Word in the Promised Land.¹⁰ Samuel faithfully upheld it.¹¹ And David called upon everyone to live in submission to it.¹² There were others. Men like Ezra had these words of life read—and ensured that the sense of it was given.¹³ Writing prophets should be included. In Ezekiel, the relationship of conversion to proclamation is clear; God demanded preaching as the means by which a valley of dry bones was raised to newness of life.¹⁴ And so, through the instrumentality of gracious words, a remnant was saved, not only from Israel but from among the nations.¹⁵ All along God's plan remained the same, relationship with him was mediated by words, his own Word—words revealed, words written down, words spoken and believed. Throughout Israel's hard and happy history, words from above resided in the mouths of men for the purpose of saving and securing a people for God.

3. *Gospels/Acts*

When we come to the gospels, we come first and foremost to Jesus of Nazareth. He is God's Word, the one to whom all previous words point and the one in whom all words are fulfilled. In Jesus, Bible words find their true and everlasting voice. This Jesus, "the word of Christ," is God's speech in full form. He is not only the final word, but the only word through whom relationship with God is made. Luke 4:16-21 provides a good example of Jesus securing conversion through the Word proclaimed:

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news (εὐαγγελίσασθαι) to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim (κηρύξαι) liberty (ἄφεσιν)¹⁶ to the captives

⁹ See Exodus 20: 18-21 and Deuteronomy 18:15-22.

¹⁰ Joshua 1:1-9, 3:7-9, 8:30-35, 14:14-16, 24:19-28

¹¹ 1 Samuel 3:10-21, 7:3-17

¹² Psalm 1, 19, 51, etc.

¹³ Ezra 7:1-10, Nehemiah 8:1-8

¹⁴ Ezekiel 37

¹⁵ Daniel 4:34-37 and Jeremiah 29:7 are suggestive of Babylon and its king. Other earlier examples include Rahab and Ruth.

¹⁶ The word translated 'liberty' in the ESV is everywhere else in Luke-Acts translated 'forgiveness' (cf. Luke 1:77; 3:3; 24:47; Ac 2:38; 5:31; 13:38; 26:18). This term (ἄφεσις) is used 15 times in Leviticus 25, mostly in reference to the year of Jubilee. By the time of Jesus uses it here, it means much more than the American declaration of possessing 'freedom' to pursue life as you see fit. Rather, it conveys the idea of being free from the debt we owe God. Thus,

And recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty (ἀφέσει) those who are oppressed,
to proclaim (κηρύξαι) the year of the Lord's favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The text Jesus takes from Isaiah has roots in Leviticus 25. There, the word liberty (ἄφεις) appears 15 times there in reference to the year of Jubilee, a time marked by the release from *debts*. God's merciful plans for Israel were produced by the act of proclamation. And according to Jesus, as it was for the year of Jubilee, so is for the debt we owe to God. Our conversion is the consequence of his proclamation.

In Luke 4, the Spirit's work of bringing God's good news into the world (εὐαγγελίσασθαι) is described in terms of the proclamation of liberty (κηρύξαι αἰχμαλώτοις ἄφεισιν). And as the very next phrase makes clear, it is the activity of preaching that produces liberty—people are ‘set at liberty’ by the ‘proclamation of liberty!’ Conversion, then, is the direct consequence of preaching—this is not only confirmed by Jesus in Luke 4, but ultimately this conversion (liberty) is fulfilled in us through him as “the word of Christ.”

The pattern of conversion as the consequence of proclamation is affirmed throughout Acts. It is through words that children for God are born. At Pentecost, salvation (σώθητε) is equated with ‘those who received his word’ (οἱ μὲν οὖν ἀποδεξάμενοι τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ). Later, in Acts 11:1, Luke uses similar words to describe the work of conversion among the Gentiles: “the Gentiles also had received the Word of God.” This same pattern is also seen in Paul's missionary work. Luke describes him going from city to city and preaching¹⁷ or speaking¹⁸ and, as a consequence, Gentiles come to faith.¹⁹ In Acts 15:3, the conversion²⁰ of the Gentiles is described in detail, with preaching again given as the cause for it.²¹

4. Epistles

The same is true in the Epistles. This is especially clear when we consider the founding of churches. Take, for instance, the church of the Thessalonians. As we see in Acts 17:1-9, the church of the Thessalonians is founded by gathering Jews and Greeks, men and women, rich and poor, around Paul's ‘reasoning from the Scriptures’ (διελέξατο αὐτοῖς ἀπὸ τῶν γραφῶν)

we are dealing with the goal of bringing about vertical restoration, the releasing of our debts owed to God (i.e. conversion, not cultural or socioeconomic transformation).

¹⁷ Preaching (κηρύσσω or καταγγέλλω) has a special significance in Luke, where the term is used frequently to describe the Apostle's active attempts at instilling faith in others. See Acts 4:2, 8:5, 10:42, 15:36, etc.

¹⁸ Speaking (λαλέω) also has a special significance in Luke, where it is used to refer to Peter and John speaking the word of the Lord (8:25), Peter speaking a message that will save an entire household (11:14), and Paul's practice of speaking in the synagogues (14:1). The term is used approximately 60 times just in Acts.

¹⁹ Luke tends not to use the complex vocabulary of conversion, but rather favors forms of πίστις and πιστεύω to describe individuals ‘coming to faith.’ See Acts 2:44, 8:12, 13:12, 14:1, 14:23, etc. The noun is used 14 times and the verb is used more than 30 times in Acts.

²⁰ Acts 15:3 contains the only New Testament use of ἐπιστροφή, the noun for conversion.

²¹ See particularly Acts 13:12 and 14:1 for the connection between speaking or preaching and faith.

and his proclamation (καταγγέλλω) of Christ's death and resurrection. He was only there a few months at most and then was chased out of town by the city authorities.

As he traveled by night to Berea, he must have been asking himself: "Will it last? Will the gospel community grow or wither and die?"²² And when he sets out to write to them, it is this question that must have motivated him. After reminding them that it was the Gospel that had been entrusted to him and not his own flattering speech, Paul makes this statement: "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."²³ In essence, the work of conversion that conceived the church of the Thessalonians is confirmed by that Word being at work in them. The work of conversion is validated by Timothy's report to Paul that the Word continues to be at work in them.²⁴

In Romans, Paul makes it clear that from Abraham onward, the whole hearted work of conversion is the result of faith in God's Word.²⁵ And to the church at Corinth he writes, "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power..."²⁶ Further, the ministry training strategy he lays out in the pastoral epistles commanded his young protégé to "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching...Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers."²⁷ The author of Hebrews asserts the need to remain in God's converting Word: "Therefore we must pay close attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it."²⁸ And Peter echoes this same theme. In 2 Peter 1, God's Word is the 'lamp shining in a dark place.'²⁹ It is quite telling then that in the next chapter, Peter says: "For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them."³⁰ The second verb there, "to turn back" (ὑποστρέφω),³¹ is literally to be 'unconverted.' In other words, when Peter is concerned that this his readers will become destroyed by heresy, he is concerned that they will be unconverted from God's holy Word.

5. John's Apocalypse

Finally, the place of preaching drives the main ideas of John's Apocalypse.³² The three great visions of Jesus (chapters 1, 5 and 19) are followed by his word going forth as the agent of

²² "Will it last?" was the way David Jackman (of The Proclamation Trust) framed the letter's occasion in a sermon on 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10 delivered at Holy Trinity Church on April 18, 2010.

²³ 1 Thessalonians 2:13

²⁴ 1 Thessalonians 1:9, 3:6-7

²⁵ Romans 3:21-5:21.

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:17

²⁷ 1 Timothy 4:13-16

²⁸ Hebrews 2:1

²⁹ 2 Peter 1:19

³⁰ 2 Peter 2:21

³¹ The New Testament vocabulary for conversion, as has already been noted, is quite complex. The idea is most often expressed verbally using forms of στρέφω. See John 12:40, Luke 1:16, James 5:20, etc.

³² Particularly helpful in studying and preparing to preach apocalyptic literature is attentiveness to literary genre. Literary genres are different in how they convey information and in their rhetorical function (e.g. compare poetry with narrative). A good understanding of genre, which is curiously absent in many seminary curricula, is critical to understanding the diverse patterns of language and so diverse ways in which to call people to

salvation and judgment. John will reinforce this word of Christ with, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”³³ When John saw the bride of Christ coming down out of heaven, it was followed by the words: “Behold, I am making all things new.... Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” As it was in the beginning, so it is still in the end: God mediates relationship with him through the proclamation of his gospel Word.

And so, I am convinced that *preaching must be done* because the Scriptures everywhere confirm that conversion flows from it. I trust that this point of primacy comes as no surprise to those seated around these tables. Still, the relationship of preaching to conversion must never be assumed or left unsaid. While the completed work of conversion (from regeneration to glorification) is ours through faith in the gospel—it is a gospel normatively made known to us through preaching. The Word of God proclaimed is the seed of life that creates and sustains us as his people. This is why Peter writes: “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.... And this word is the good news that was preached to you.”³⁴ The Apostle Paul confirms the same: “But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching...So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ?”³⁵

By biblical conviction then, the relationship of preaching to conversion is one of profound necessity. It is what breath is to voice. It is what the planting of seed must be for one hoping to harvest a crop yet to be. For many, it is what reading glasses are to the destinations and delights found only in words written down. For blunt strategists, preaching to conversion is what means are to ends. For mothers in mid-summer, it is the child’s persistent boredom that will give way to a creative invention. And for anyone who has ever traveled by car, or train, boat or plane, it is, quite simply, what gas is to going. The relationship of preaching to conversion is deeply profound—even more so than that of making love to making life.

Put simply, we preach the mystery of “Christ in you, the hope of glory”³⁶ because gospel proclamation produces biblical conversion. When asked “Why do you so often preach on ‘Ye must be born again?’” George Whitefield, looking solemnly into the face of his questioner replied, “Ye must be born again.”³⁷ How concise and yet how true. If any among Adam’s crestfallen race should ever ascend to the daring heights of knowing God, of being

conversion from the various genres. For example, understanding the rhetorical use of “belief” in the Gospels (esp. John) is useful in preparing to preach for conversion from the gospels. The apologetic or evangelistic usefulness of imagery as a function of genre in poetry or apocalyptic literature is critical to finding the gospel in those genres. Wisdom literature has a capacity to speak to people in a very different and highly pragmatic way that locates conversion in the phrase ‘fear the Lord.’ Simply put: evangelistic preaching must use the tools of literary genre.

³³ The themes of blessedness and ‘keeping God’s Word’ are maintained throughout the book (‘keeping God’s Word’ is found in 1:3; 2:26; 3:3, 8, 10; 12:17; 14:12; 16:15 metaphorically; 22:7 and 9; the idea of ‘blessedness’ in connection with ‘keeping God’s Word’ appears in 1:3, 16:15 metaphorically; and 22:7).

³⁴ 1 Peter 1:23-25

³⁵ Romans 10:14-17

³⁶ Colossians 1 :27

³⁷ As reprinted in A.C. Dixon, *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* (newspaper), May 20, 1925, Pastor Spurgeon’s Tabernacle, London.

everlastingly united in him, of awaking in relationship to him, of becoming fully and fruitfully converted by him—then such aspiring dreams rest upon the act of gospel preaching.

II. PRAYERS MUST BE MADE.

It would be a mistake to take the principle that *preaching must be done* in isolation—as if God’s great and glorious work of conversion rested merely upon the preaching of the Word. While it is true that people are converted by the act of preaching, we must never forget that the work of conversion rests not in the man nor ultimately in the precision or persuasion of his message. Rather, the word of the gospel is wedded to the Spirit’s work, in whom conviction of sin, regeneration, repentance and faith, and lifelong perseverance are given. Put differently, conversion rests upon the saving and securing power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, my conviction is this: It is the Spirit of God who takes the Word of God to create the children of God. And not only that, but this act of re-creating—what we call conversion—is the work of God from beginning to end.

This understanding of conversion—namely, that from first to last we are brought into a saving relationship with God by the power of His Spirit who graciously applies the word of Christ to us through faith—informs our preaching. We who preach, become ‘we who pray,’ as this alone is a sure indication that we understand the true source of conversion. Faithful and fruitful preachers are those who prepare messages on their knees as well as from behind the study desk. By experience, we know what it is to plant our faces in the floor pleading for God to accomplish the work that our best efforts in preaching cannot. In a word, we are desperate—desperate for the power of the Holy Spirit to attend our preaching. Simply put, we pray. We pray in advance of preaching. We pray in the act of preaching. We pray even after our preaching is done. For we are convinced that people will only come to recognize Jesus as God’s saving King as God chooses to reveal himself to them.³⁸

Of all the gospel writers, Luke seems especially interested in showing how prayer precedes recognition of Jesus. When Peter responded to Jesus’ question “But who do you say that I am?” with “the Christ of God” in 9:20, Luke had just told his readers: “Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him.”³⁹ In other words, Luke wants his readers to know that Jesus was revealed to Peter in the context of prayer. Later in chapter 9 he will write of the Transfiguration—a time when Jesus was revealed in glory as “my Son, my Chosen One, listen to him!”⁴⁰ Interestingly, here too Luke records that this recognition came when “he took with him Peter and John and James and went on the mountain to pray.”⁴¹ This pericope echoes something much earlier, wherein Luke makes this same connection between prayer and a true recognition of Jesus. Aged Simeon and Anna are both identified as pious people of prayer—statements which immediately precede God’s timing in revealing Jesus to them.⁴² Finally, when

³⁸ In Acts 16:11-15 we see Lydia’s conversion to Christ. Interestingly, her recognition of Jesus as God’s saving King came on a day when she had gone “outside the gate to the riverside to pray.” Luke then records that Paul “spoke to the women who had come together.... [and] the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized....” This is but one of many instances where the saving word of God is recognized for what it is in the context of people making prayers and sitting under the hearing of God’s Word.

³⁹ Luke 9:18a

⁴⁰ Luke 9:28-36

⁴¹ Luke 9:28

⁴² Luke 2:27 and 37; cf. Luke 2:28-32 and 38

God saw fit to reveal the identity of Jesus to the people present at his baptism in an event that foreshadows the Transfiguration, Luke records that the heavens were opened and that God sent the Holy Spirit on him “in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”⁴³ This recognition comes on the heels of “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened.”⁴⁴ Luke could not have been any clearer: God reveals Jesus to people as a consequence of prayer. And so, we pray that God will likewise choose to reveal his Son to people through the Holy Spirit in our preaching.⁴⁵

III. POWER MUST BE UNDERSTOOD.

A Biblical grasp of conversion should affect our preaching, compelling us to be humble in motivation, bold in conviction, and clear in presentation of the Gospel.

1. Humility

Understanding the role the Holy Spirit plays in conversion is critical. This informs us of the true place of power in preaching. The power for conversion rests with God alone. By conviction then, we abandon all pretense and show—all conventions in preaching—anything that betrays a belief that the power to convert rests somehow in us. Put simply, a biblical grasp of conversion demands *humility*. We are done with undue interest in artistry or form. We disown fame, acclaim and the pursuit of money: “For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never come with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others.”⁴⁶

2. Boldness

That said, humble preaching must not be taken for timid preaching. Rather, a biblical grasp of conversion fosters proclamation characterized by *boldness*. Paul writes: “Pray...make supplication...also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth *boldly* to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it *boldly* as I ought to speak.”⁴⁷ Opposition to our message does not make us shrink back in fear. Rather, in prayer we are strengthened to fully expect God to save people through preaching. And in faith, we fearlessly call upon him to honor the words being released from our mouths as arrows—that they might possess the power to convert our hearers by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

3. Clarity

Given what we know about the power for conversion then, we make humility and boldness hallmarks—all the while working hard to ensure that our preaching is *clear*. A biblical grasp of conversion makes us content if the glories of Christ are made clear by us—above the desire for

⁴³ Luke 3:22b

⁴⁴ Luke 3:21

⁴⁵ This connection between significant events in Luke and a context of prayer was first pointed out to me by David Short at a Charles Simeon Trust preaching workshop in March 2009 in Toronto.

⁴⁶ 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6a. See also 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 and 2 Corinthians 4:1-2.

⁴⁷ Ephesians 6:18-20

crowds and cleverness to be attributed to us. As Paul requested, “Continue steadfastly in prayer...pray also for us... that I may make it *clear*, which is how I ought to speak.”⁴⁸

IV. PRESENT DAY PRAXIS MUST BE INFORMED.

How to best go about making the gospel clear in our day continues to be a source of heated discussion. This is true, not only for the rank and file within Evangelicalism, but for its loosely constituted leadership as well. On this subject there will continue to be ongoing debate and dissent for some time. It is my conviction that our present day praxis must be informed, especially concerning the relationships among preaching, conversion and our present day context. I think we must begin by considering, among other things, these three: our ability to prove Christ from all the Scriptures, our adoption of Paul’s methodology for contextualization, and our aim of being Christo-telic, not merely Christo-centric.

1. *Our Ability to Prove Christ From all the Scriptures*

In recent decades, much has been written about the discipline of biblical theology.⁴⁹ This paper is not the place to define the discipline or even attempt outlining its many benefits. Nevertheless, Biblical theology is immensely relevant to the relationship of preaching to conversion. Biblical theology—or apologetics by way of coherence—was the method Jesus employed in bringing his earliest followers to saving faith. Luke 24 recounts the story of two travelers headed to Emmaus after Jesus’ death and burial. Along the way Jesus joins them. In due time he speaks those well known verses which are so often used to support the discipline of biblical theology:

O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.⁵⁰

Earlier in the text Luke had recorded for us that “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”⁵¹ This act by which the identity of Jesus was concealed is significant. Converting faith ultimately rests upon seeing Jesus’ death and resurrection as the fulfillment of God’s promised words. In essence, the forgiveness we offer people in his name by faith is grounded in his cross work as the fullness of God’s promises foretold in words long ago put down. Jesus was not interested in converting people to a belief in him merely by means of some ‘experience’ they had with him.

Further, this apologetic of coherence, or proving (παρατίθημι) Christ from all the Scriptures does not end with Jesus own example. It is modeled by Paul as well. In Acts 17:2-3 his preaching to the Thessalonians is described this way:

⁴⁸ Colossians 4:2-3

⁴⁹ Goldsworthy, Graeme. *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1991). Goldsworthy, Graeme. *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). Clowney, Edmund P. *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003). For parents with young children, see my own attempt in *The Big Picture Story Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

⁵⁰ Luke 24:25-26

⁵¹ Luke 24:16

And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned (διελέξατο) with them from the Scriptures, explaining (διανοίγων) and proving (παρατιθέμενος) that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim (καταγγέλλω) to you, is the Christ.”⁵²

Of his preaching in Athens, Luke records: “So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.”⁵³ And in Corinth: “He reasoned (διελέγετο) in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade (ἔπειθέν) Jews and Greeks.”⁵⁴ In Ephesus: “he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned (διελέξατο) with the Jews.”⁵⁵ And again: “for three months spoke boldly, reasoning (διαλεγόμενος) and persuading (πείθων) them about the kingdom of God.”⁵⁶

Four observations stand out in Paul’s practice.

First, the skills of reasoning, proving and persuading marked his approach when preaching for conversion. Reasoning (forms of διαλέγομαι) is the most general term that Luke uses and typically carries the neutral sense of discursive argumentation. Proving (forms of παρατίθημι) is a more technical term, carrying the sense of offering up an idea for consideration. Persuading (forms of πειθώ) is the least neutral term, though it can be used either positively (‘to demonstrate definitively’) or negatively (‘to mislead’). Each term has a rich background in Hellenistic moral philosophy⁵⁷ and evokes the semantic domain of logical argumentation and the rhetoric of persuasion.

Second, he employed these tools in diverse contexts, in the synagogue as well as the marketplace, and in the presence of both Jews and Greeks.

Third, this kind of preaching led to conversions! Luke records:

And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women...But some of men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them...Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed...Also many of those who were now believers came...So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.⁵⁸

Fourth, Paul found ways to preach this same gospel in settings where no biblical knowledge could be assumed. As such, this particular aspect might inform our preaching to those lacking

⁵² Acts 17:2-3

⁵³ Acts 17:17

⁵⁴ Acts 18:4

⁵⁵ Acts 18:19

⁵⁶ Acts 19:8

⁵⁷ Interestingly, active forms of πειθώ have no substantive Hebrew counterpart or history in the LXX, whereas the other terms Luke uses have the dual backgrounds.

⁵⁸ Acts 17:4, 34; 18:8; 19:18, 20

categories that require a working familiarity with biblical background and vocabulary. It is actually this point on which I will focus in the next section.

So, what might we learn by observing the role biblical theology played in the apologetic method of Jesus and Paul? First, our own preaching must resist attempts at converting hearers by experientially based preaching uncoupled from God’s reasonable Word. Second, we affirm that belief is best secured when gospel preaching is anchored in biblical text. After all, ‘what you save people by, you save them to.’⁵⁹ Third, conversion occurs when God’s Word is explained within its historical and redemptive context. Therefore, the normal pattern of our ministry should be the expounding of Biblical texts within their immediate context, as well as within the larger place of God’s redemptive plan in Christ. Fourth, if we intend to follow the apologetic pattern and practice of Jesus and Paul—and we should—we must give ourselves to the study of biblical theology and the practice of proving Christ from all the Scriptures (something at which most of us are woefully inadequate).⁶⁰

2. *Our Adoption of Paul’s Methodology for Contextualization*

The issue of contextualization is bound to be on the minds of most readers at this point. While it is good to advocate for the systematic exposition of biblical texts for those raised in biblical traditions, we must also ask: how are we to preach to people completely unfamiliar with the biblical world and its history, language, theology and ideas? In short, what is the relationship of conversion to preaching in the post-Christian West? In beginning to answer these questions, Luke’s portrayal of Paul’s Athenian discourse is instructive.

A. *Athens as Setting*

Athens was filled with people who did not possess traditional *categories* for understanding the Bible.⁶¹ They lacked our theological framework and the canonical language necessary for immediate comprehension of the gospel message. In fact, Luke tells us that one Athenian reaction to Paul’s gospel preaching was, “What does this babbler (σπερμολόγος) wish to say?”⁶² The word σπερμολόγος means ‘seed picker’ or ‘scavenger’—somebody who gets one idea from here and another from over there, the combination of which results in something that seems incomplete. In other words, Paul was mocked by some for preaching a message that had no unifying center, and therefore, no ability to sway public opinion.⁶³

Another reaction to Paul’s message was: “‘He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities’ (ξένων δαιμονίων)—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.”⁶⁴ The word

⁵⁹ Something Philip Jensen said to me years ago when I began attempting dialogical evangelism in group contexts.

⁶⁰ In praxis, too many preachers are simply reading the Old Testament through the question: “Where is Jesus in this text?” Such a reductionistic approach treats the Hebrew Scriptures as the “Where’s Waldo” books – looking only for the character hidden in the page. This can only lead to boring and predictable preaching. We need to work hard at seeing a broader range of gospel material emerging from the Old Testament. We should be asking questions like “What difference does Jesus coming make to the way I understand this text?” or “How does this text anticipate, amplify, exemplify, or even ironically display the gospel of Jesus Christ?”

⁶¹ I am well aware of the many aspects of discontinuity, not the least of which is that Athens represents a ‘Pre-Christian’ city. Nevertheless, pre-Christian Athens represents a world very much like our own.

⁶² Acts 17:18

⁶³ Acts 17:32

⁶⁴ Acts 17:18

‘foreign’ (ξένων) is also used in verse 21 in a substantive form (ξένοι, translated as ‘foreigners’). The phrase ‘foreign divinities’ suggests that part of the Athenian problem had to do with understanding Paul’s meaning. They had differing ideas on what a god should be; they had not yet come to see just how different Paul’s gospel is. In essence, when the Athenians first heard the gospel they thought it strange, unfamiliar, and as of yet, outside their present pantheon.

The same discontinuity can be expressed about Christian preaching today. For, when we preach “the resurrection of Jesus changes everything,” we are often met with blank stares, perplexed smiles and brief statements that reveal complete unfamiliarity or expectations that lack an understanding of the real power of the gospel.

The lack of *categories* for understanding our preaching is not, however, the only thing connecting our setting to Athens. The idea that a *city* (πόλις) can be a good setting for gospel work was present then as now.⁶⁵ Prior to chapter 17, the narrative of Acts has more often recorded conversions taking place in rural settings, smaller villages and insignificant towns. After the stoning of Stephen, believers were said to have “scattered throughout the region” of Samaria.⁶⁶ And while the word ‘city’ is sometimes employed, the actual places remain unnamed. In addition, when Philip is sent on his preaching mission to the Ethiopian Eunuch, Luke inserts this revealing commentary: “This is a desert place.”⁶⁷ And then later, while Paul’s first missionary journey does bring him to two places of prominence—Psidian Antioch and Damascus—those visits are quickly followed by a trip inland to Galatia’s smaller towns of Lystra and Derbe, from which Luke conveys that they left “to the surrounding country” to preach.⁶⁸

Things change, however, with Paul’s second missionary journey. Now in Athens, the narrative begins to regularly show cities of stature as important settings for the spread of the gospel.⁶⁹ So, a point of preaching contact has been made—this present world is moving rapidly toward cities as places of primacy.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Acts 17:16

⁶⁶ Acts 8:1

⁶⁷ Acts 9:1

⁶⁸ Acts 14:6

⁶⁹ The five cities on Paul’s second journey were those of Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth. Four of the five were important port cities, the exception being Berea (which did however possess a certain ‘nobility’ all on its own in 17:11). Also, a valid argument can be made that Athens (17:16), not Rome, is the high water mark of Acts. In other words, Luke’s portrayal of the Athenian discourse is his intended structural center and climactic moment in his narrative. This can be seen by tracing the flow of thought from 1:8 through 8:1 to 13:47 to 16:10. When Paul arrives at Athens then, he arrives at the ‘ends of the earth’—to a citizenry largely without traditional biblical categories to inform them.

⁷⁰ The statistical data in the United States confirms this trend. The 1900 decennial census concluded that 40 percent of the population in the United States were “urban.” By 1950, that total had risen to 64 percent. By 1990, that total was 75 percent. And as of the 2000 decennial census, that total is 79 percent. See “Rural Populations: 1900 to 1990,” n.p. [cited 8 May 2010]. Online: <http://www.census.gov/population/censusdata/urpop0090.txt>. See also “Census 2000 Population Statistics,” n.p. [cited 8 May 2010]. Online: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/census/cps2k.htm>.

Athens of old is ‘the great city’ to which all ‘great cities’ today aspire. In its prime, it was an economic engine, an educational powerhouse, and culturally eclectic—three things that characterize greatness today. It was native city to Socrates and Plato. Further, it was the adopted home of Aristotle, Epicurus and Zeno, the place of the Parthenon, the Agora, the Areopagus, and it had more temples that one can excavate in a lifetime.

The *citizenry* of Athens is a third factor uniting our worlds. The people of Athens were as diverse as any we might find in a world class city today. Luke records that monotheists were among them, both, “Jews and the devout persons.”⁷¹ Pluralists also abounded. The famous Agora allows us to envision all sorts of people. The law courts gave rise to magistrates and lawyers alike. The mint, monuments and multitude of temples meant that members of the working class and businessman were present too. Educators also should not be forgotten; Luke tells us they were comprised of “Epicureans and Stoic philosophers.”⁷² Their presence is important, for it signals that “the Athenian aspiration”⁷³ was alive and well—for what set Athens apart in the ancient world was a desire among the elites for something greater than material or military glory to be achieved by humanity.

Clearly then, Athens has elements in common with us. And while our worlds are not the same, I trust enough continuity has been demonstrated to prove the value of using Athens as a model for exploring how to preach the gospel to people unfamiliar with the biblical world. After all, it was a great city, a center very much like what half of the world’s population now lives in. And, the *citizenry* of Athens was religiously diverse. It was a place where world views collided. It had no problem being pluralistic, relativistic, religious and irreligious all at the same time. And the people apparently never felt the need to apologize for it. Athens was a city filled with people who didn’t possess the traditional religious *categories* that would have made comprehension of the gospel message easy. Given an overlap in *setting* then, how might Paul’s Athenian *strategy* and *speech* assist our preaching in praxis?

B. Athens as Strategy

In the broadest sense, our attempts at contextualization must always avoid one of two mistakes. On the one hand, if preaching is always grounded in opposition to culture, our message will be rejected by the world before we even have the opportunity to present it. On the other hand, if we accommodate our message for the world (or assimilate the pattern of our lives to the world), we forfeit the very ground that enables us to be useful to God in this world.

In Athens, Paul avoids both errors. He found a way to take God’s unchanging message into a world nearly void of biblical categories and rife with theological confusion. By observation, three strategies characterize his approach—methods to help us think about praxis today: an interpersonal strategy, a strategy that embraces integration, and a strategic pursuit of an internal change of heart.

⁷¹ Acts 17:17

⁷² Acts 17:18

⁷³ This wonderful phrase was first suggested to me by Benjamin T. Lynerd in personal correspondence.

Interpersonal Strategy

First, an *interpersonal* strategy can be observed. Luke’s portrayal of Paul states that he reasoned (διελέγετο) and conversed (συνέβαλλον) with Athenians, both in the synagogue and the marketplace.⁷⁴ In other words, his proclamation was not one dimensional. That is, we should not think of him merely standing behind a lectern delivering a monologue. Rather, this interpersonal strategy played off a dialogical style, in church and on the street. This relational aspect in proclamation is powerfully related at the end of Luke’s retelling—we are left with real names and real people.⁷⁵

Further, an interpersonal strategy requires respect for both the person you are speaking with and the culture in which they live. Nowhere is this respect more evident in Paul’s visit to Athens than the manner in which he was given opportunity to speak at the Areopagus. Luke records: “...and they took hold of him (ἐπιλαβόμενοι αὐτοῦ) and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?’”⁷⁶ The phrase “and they took hold of him” (ἐπιλαβόμενοι αὐτοῦ) is informative.⁷⁷ It indicates no sense of presumption on Paul’s part. He didn’t force his way onto the Athenian scene. He didn’t demand an audience. Rather, his sermon was requested.

Integrative Strategy

Second, Paul’s preaching strategy embraced *integration*. Luke’s portrayal clears Paul from any false charge of fundamentalist zealotry—of being a religious iconoclast. While Paul was righteously provoked (παρωξύνετο) at the plethora of Athenian idols, he did not react by overturning them in the streets. In fact, his response was quite the opposite. He allowed them to stand to his own apologetic advantage:

Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, “To the unknown god.” What therefore, you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Acts 17:17-18. The reference to the *marketplace* is important. Preaching is taken out of church and into culture.

⁷⁵ Acts 17:34

⁷⁶ See Acts 17:19. Interestingly, Luke might be alluding from Plato’s *Republic* in an effort to make this interpersonal point. Whether this is an actual allusion and whether such an allusion is conscious or unconscious is a matter for serious academic debate. In the prelude, Socrates is said to be returning home from Athens following a festival in honor of a new god. On his way through town though, a slave is said to have “caught hold of my coat from behind” (λαβόμενος τοῦ ἱματίου) and requested that he wait for someone who wanted to hear from him. The ironic humor is there for anyone who knows anything about Socrates at all—he never needed to be detained by anyone if the chance was there for profitable conversation. He would talk to anyone at anytime on things that matter most! The same was true of Paul. Yet here, Luke’s portrayal of Paul at Athens places his speech as ‘having’ to, rather than as a consequence of his own will. So too for *The Republic* – this seminal work might never have been delivered if not for the catching hold of a coat—how lucky we are on both accounts! Interpersonal strategies demand respect for the people to whom we speak.

⁷⁷ Clare Rothschild translates it here: “detained.” See Clare K. Rothschild, “*Epimenides Redivivus*” (paper presented at colloquia at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München in 2009 and Humboldt Universität, Berlin in 2009) or her forthcoming monograph *Epimenides Redivivus: Text, Translation, and Commentary on Acts 17* (WUNT. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). Richard Pervo suggests that it may have carried an even stronger sense, something like “arrested.” Pervo, Richard I. *Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

⁷⁸ Acts 17:22-23

By opening his message with ‘the unknown god,’ Paul plays to the intellectual sensibilities of his learned listeners. Most scholars are willing to cede that many things are yet unknown (both inside and outside their discipline)—the term used by Paul in Acts 17:23 is literally a form of ἄγνῶστω, from which we get the term ‘agnosticism.’ Opening his message in this way was a genius stroke. As Van Til put it: “Even among the cultured it was in good style to recognize the fact that there was more in heaven and on earth than they had yet dreamed of in their philosophy...they were perfectly willing therefore to leave open a place for the unknown.”⁷⁹

Can you imagine if Paul had chosen to employ an iconoclastic apologetic instead? If Paul had taken a sledgehammer to the altars, or led a boycott against attendance at the festivals, or plastered a slogan ‘against the Athenian way’ on billboards entering the city, it certainly would have made his message intelligible. But, it also might have done great harm to the gospel. Bombastic strategies may rid the world of its pagan or religious external symbols—but whenever Christians adopt them, they fail to win the minds and hearts of those who live and walk among the idols.⁸⁰

Strategic Pursuit of an Internal Change of Heart

A third characteristic of Paul’s approach toward Athens is seen by what motivated him: he labored for life transformation through an *internal change of heart*. I have come to think that the greatest textual evidence for this in the Athenian discourse comes in ironic fashion. Paul’s commitment to internal change of heart is seen in his call for the citizenry to ‘repent’ (μετανοεῖν).⁸¹ These bold words indicate his desire for nothing less than a complete turning of the mind, heart and will.⁸² And we could learn something here.

It is worth noting the sermonic progression from ‘times of ignorance’ to ‘repentance.’ Too many today are open to preaching the need for a spiritual journey, but never press people to something beyond ignorance. They never demand a ‘turning.’ Preachers who long for conversion however, must press listeners on this point. For it is the greatest evidence we desire life transformation through an internal change. We should be asking ourselves then, ‘Are we preaching for internal change of heart? Am I reticent to call for repentance?’ Remember, the goal of contextualization is not that the message of the gospel merely becomes ‘part of the ongoing conversation.’ We do not preach for the sake of being in the dialogue. Rather, we are out to win the minds, hearts and will of our listeners to the full praise Christ deserves.

⁷⁹ Van Til, Cornelius. *Paul at Athens* (pamphlet). (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1978): 6.

⁸⁰ Two questions might be raised in regard to the implications of this last point. First: what about the command God gave Israel to tear down the high places? In response: the coming of Jesus does make a difference in matters like this. We are no longer living under God’s old covenant ‘theocracy.’ In the New Testament economy we are sojourners and exiles here. Second: what about the example Jesus set by overturning the tables in the temple? In response: whenever idolatry is found within the people of God it should be met with the greatest of hostilities, even to the point of external overthrow. The Church must always stand against idolatry within the family of God – there is no room for integration here, for that would actually be accommodation.

⁸¹ Acts 17:30

⁸² Paul’s joy over the Thessalonians demonstrates this same point: “...you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

Three proclamation strategies have been observed in Paul's approach to Athens. Preaching for conversion led him to adopt an interpersonal dimension known for its commitments to relationship and dialogue. Like him, we should be adopting strategies that are dialogical in nature, and respectful of relationship. Further, he embraced integration. He found ways to use even idolatry to gospel advantage. And so should we. And third, his preaching strategy was focused on securing an internal change of heart. This is our goal, come what may. In Athens, these three strategies bore manifold responses to the gospel. Acts 17:32-34 tells us that some *rejected* Paul's message, others desired another opportunity *reconsider* the merits of his message, while others still were made *regenerate*—they were converted to Christianity by Spirit and by Word. We should expect nothing less in our own day.

C. Athens as Speech

I want to highlight three emphases from Paul's speech that should inform present preaching praxis (more than these are worthy of attention). The three are: the gospel shape of the Athenian discourse, the use of metaphor, and the theology of creation.

Identifying the Gospel Shape

Paul's Athenian discourse reveals the gospel shape of the Bible, even if it does not expound a particular biblical text. This shape is particularly evident in the way that Paul's sermon draws out Biblical theological categories.

Introduction

Paul turns iconic cultural objects into conversation on God (Acts 17:22-23)

Body

Paul begins at the beginning, with God creating the heavens and the earth (17:24a)

He reveals that humanity's universal problem is idolatry (17:24b-25)

He emphasizes God's eternity and desire to be in relationship to us (17:26-28)

He proclaims human culpability and calls for repentance (17:29-30)

Conclusion

He points to resurrection of Jesus as the one to whom our allegiance belongs (17:31)

He ends with God judging the world in righteousness (17:31)

Notice, it takes Paul all of eight verses to cover the ground of Genesis to Revelation. He moves effortlessly from beginning to end, from creation to consummation—speaking of God as Creator, humanity as fallen, Christ as resurrected, and returning in judgment on a day fixed in heaven.⁸³ As such, this sermon provides a model for how we might effectively preach to people unfamiliar with Christian categories—by moving them through the grand sweep of biblical history rather than through the lens of a particular text.⁸⁴ Put simply, in praxis we must be capable of preaching the gospel shape of the Bible in setting where our listeners are unfamiliar

⁸³ These highly 'Christian' motifs in the message are at odds with some within scholarship who view the speech as sub-Christian, or one that extols the pagan god Zeus. Cf. Norden, Eduard. *Untersuchungen zur Formgeschichte religiöser Rede* (Berlin: Teubner, 1913, 1929).

⁸⁴ The Athenian discourse is a 'one off' sermon (not part of an expository series), and as such, is an especially helpful evangelistic model for such occasions.

with its textual narrative. That is, our preaching must bring out the substance of the gospel: the person and purposes of God, the fall of mankind, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the necessity of new birth, and the final judgment.

The Use of Metaphor

Throughout history, Christian preaching has been marked by an attempt to spark gospel discussion through the images of surrounding culture. I call this apologetic approach *outside-in*. That is, present day unfamiliarity with the world of biblical ideas, language and history encourages preaching to step outside Biblical imagery and into imagery that people understand. Once a point of contact is made, then proclamation can turn the cultural image back to concepts intrinsic to the Christian faith.⁸⁵ While this method has been helpful in many ways, I wonder if we need additional diverse approaches—options that might open up new doors for preaching and conversion.⁸⁶

One possibility might be an apologetic that I am calling *inside-outside-in*. In essence, gospel preaching would be strengthened if preachers first looked inside the Old Testament for the metaphors used to describe key concepts of the Christian faith. For example, the idea of sin is described in the Old Testament primarily in three ways: as a weight to be born, a stain to be removed, and a debt to be paid.⁸⁷ These metaphors already reside *inside* the biblical text. The second task of the preacher, then, is to express this idea through familiar images already present *outside* the world of biblical language and history. That is, the Old Testament metaphor should then be preached through the images and ideas found outside the Bible. This move to the Bible first and the culture second prepares the listener for the time when we can move them back *in* to the Bible's narrative.

⁸⁵ In this respect, when Paul picked up the image of Athenian idols, he took hold of something present in the culture and the Bible—he never had to move *outside-in*—idolatry was an easy *inside-inside* argument. His allusions to and quotations of their poets reveal a more classically *outside-in* apologetic.

⁸⁶ In principle, Schleiermacher attempted a kind of strictly *outside-in* approach. In practice and in a very different way, Fosdick also attempted it. In both cases, the Gospel was lost and, ultimately, a better connection to culture was not even gained. I agree that the principle of contextualization demands at some point a movement of *outside-in*. But the movement of *outside* to *inside* is not just one thing. In practice, when someone preaches using movies and television as the primary basis of their preaching (rather than Scripture), there are certain implications that must be considered. If the preacher does not begin with the very Gospel that holds him, he can very easily compromise that Gospel in merely starting *outside*. In other words, we must learn that Paul's use of the Greek poets in Acts 17 makes use of *outside* without compromising anything on the *inside*. Whether the Gospel is compromised is the key issue, not the flexibility with which we apply an *outside-in* approach.

⁸⁷ The *inside-outside-in* idea materialized in my mind while reading Gary Anderson's recent book, *Sin*. Anderson, Gary. *Sin: A History*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Anderson lists the three primary Old Testament metaphors for sin: weight, stain, debt. And within that constellation, the metaphor 'bearing weight' is by far the most often one used (108 occurrences). Broadly, Anderson argues that the word *sin* has a history. After tracing the way the word is used in the Old Testament (paying special attention to the metaphors used for it), Anderson goes on to show those metaphors are nuanced in meaning by the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In this way, the reader comes to understand the subtle shift in meaning that occurs by New Testament times. For example, the metaphor of sin as a debt in Leviticus 25 only carried a semantic domain relating to ethics and socio-economic conditions. Yet, by the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it is being used in a moral sense for the first time: "Liberty will be proclaimed to free them from all their iniquities." (11QMelchizedek). And as we have already seen in Luke 4, Jesus uses it to speak about the debt we owe to God and the forgiveness that is extended to us in him.

Viewing the Bible, rather than culture, as the beginning point for contextualization is counterintuitive, but I think it has many advantages. First, it holds us, as preachers, more tightly into the language of the Biblical text. And our own study of the biblical text would be enriched as a consequence. Second, it better prepares the listener for the Bible's narrative on its own terms.⁸⁸ And third, approaching gospel speech in this way would keep the preacher from an unhealthy over-emphasis on 'exegeting our culture.' The present fascination with this phenomenon among Evangelical preachers has nearly turned cultural exegesis into a studied discipline for ministry preparation—a study which often forgets that, actually, the Bible exegetes our culture.

Recovering a Theology of Creation

Paul was onto something when he proclaimed: "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of the heavens and the earth does not live in temples made by man."⁸⁹ And again when he said: "And he made from one man every nation of mankind..."⁹⁰ No one can doubt that his Athenian discourse is dominated in its opening by a theology of creation. Elsewhere, the Scriptures show this same emphasis. In John's Apocalypse, the four living creatures are said to be casting their crowns before the throne saying:

"Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created."⁹¹

Psalm 33:8-9 echoes this same refrain in calling people to repentance before God,

"Let all the earth fear the LORD,
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

In Romans the argument is built on the same premise. The universality of man's sin is, in 1:18-32, formulated as crimes against God as Creator.⁹² In Ephesians, the call to life as a Christian is built on "creation" language.⁹³ Likewise, the introduction to the Gospel of John is set in Creation and finishes in new creation. For these biblical apologists, the idea of God as our Creator is the very grounds for our worship of Jesus. Put simply, the apologists we find in the Bible itself demand repentance, precisely because God made us and, therefore, he alone has a rightful claim upon us. The lesson is clear: a robust theology of creation is vital. And without it,

⁸⁸ There must be Old Testament metaphors that help define things like salvation, judgment, mediator, etc.

⁸⁹ Acts 17:24

⁹⁰ Acts 17:26

⁹¹ Revelation 4:11

⁹² See especially Romans 1:19-20 and 1:24-25.

⁹³ See Ephesians 2:10 in which the initiation of the Christian life of a person is described as being "created in Christ Jesus." This sentiment is echoed in 2:15 in which the coming together of Greeks and Jews in Christ Jesus is described as being "created in himself one" by Jesus. This idea is picked up again in 4:24 wherein the "new self" of the converted Christian is described, rich echoing Genesis, as "created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

I seriously doubt that we will make much progress in seeing the Post-Christian West turn to Christ.

Compare it with the situation today. If one confesses belief in “God the Father, the Almighty, Maker of the heavens and the earth,” he or she is made redundant by the contemporary culture. Ours is a culture that puts anyone who believes that God created in a box called ‘creationist,’ the implications of which is that this person is a non-thinking, anti-science, young earth advocate stuck in the middle ages of six-day-literalism. On the other hand, ‘thinking people’ prefer Karen Armstrong, who opened her famous work, *A History of God*, this way: “In the beginning, human beings created a God who was the First Cause of all things and Ruler of heaven and earth.”⁹⁴ In other words, the temptation is to give up on the idea of divine creation at all and find some other kind of creation that moves beyond six-day literalism and the categorization of ‘unthinking people’ in order to appeal to the ‘thinking people.’

And so, there is no way around this. But, if we are to faithfully preach the gospel, we must find ways to speak of God as Creator without impaling our message on the stakes of modern life. I truly think that this task will be harder in our day than it was for Paul on that day when he spoke at the Areopagus. His context had not yet given up on the idea of divine creation. But ours, especially in academic circles, has. If we are going to preach effectively for conversions, we need to be preachers and apologists who have a well developed theology of creation.

3. Our Aim of Being Christo-telic, Not Merely Christo-centric

Having now considered our ability to prove Christ from all of the Scriptures and several facets of Paul’s contextualization strategies in Athens, I want to narrow in the focus on the centrality of Christ in our strategies. Preachers everywhere are now beginning to work hard at reading the Bible with Jesus at ‘the center’ as they do the work of contextualization. Moralistic preaching is now on the wane. Pulpits long given to devotional drivel are now being challenged to greater substance. And using the Bible merely to impart ‘lessons for living’ is not as accepted as it might have been even a few years ago. This is a good thing for many reasons, not the least of which is conversion.

That said, our present discovery of Jesus as the ‘center’ needs improving, especially in calling people to conversion. Jesus is not merely in the middle of things (as if by ‘conversion’ we mean somehow getting him to the center of otherwise pretty well balanced lives). In point of fact, Jesus’ death, resurrection and reign demonstrate that in him we have the end (τέλος) of all things. It was this Christo-telic interpretation of biblical texts that drove the Apostles’ to command, declare and assert repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is what compelled them to demand a response from their hearers. If Jesus was not the end of God’s plans and purposes the record of their preaching would be littered instead with soft invitation, consideration, opinion and option. But it is not.

⁹⁴ Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. (New York: Random House, 1993): 3.

Take Peter's sermon at Pentecost for example. It is precisely because the gospel he proclaimed was rooted in 'the latter days' (ταῖς ἔσχαταις ἡμέραις) that he took such bold aim in his conclusion:

Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation."⁹⁵

Luke summarizes Peter's Christo-telic message in similar fashion:

And he [Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.⁹⁶

The difference between Peter's message that converted Cornelius and his household from the one we so often preach today is seen in Jesus as *judge*. We often limit his role to *savior*. In praxis, our preaching should now work hard at reversing this unfortunate trend. Biblical theology should always impart an eschatological edge into our preaching. We preach for conversion—but from the stance of Christ as ruler. When we call people to Jesus it should be with the conviction that he is the one presently ruling for God into all eternity. Preaching for conversion requires calling for response. It demands it. A biblical grasp of conversion for preaching requires nothing less than a Christo-telic emphasis.

V: TRAINING PREACHERS SHOULD BE OUR PRIORITY.

My fifth conviction is that the work of God, including that of conversion, will go forward as preachers train men to handle the Word of God. While the biblical mandate for this idea is frequently acknowledged by Paul in his letters, nowhere is it clearer than 2 Timothy 2:1-2.

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

In this verse, we have the apostolic method of insuring gospel growth for the coming generations. In a word, it is *training*. Paul commands his apprentice, Timothy, to equip others to handle God's Word. There are four generations listed here: Paul, Timothy, the men Timothy will train, and the people who those men will train. So as it was in their day, it is in ours. The call to train is the same. We must *convince*, *encourage* and *show* the next generation of preachers and teachers how to proclaim God's Word.

From my own observation, I would say the men in this room are quite good at *convincing* pastors and those in ministry out there and *encouraging* them of the necessity of handling God's Word well. At the same time, the rubber really hits the road with the third item in that list—*showing* them how to do it. This is the challenge if we are to maintain this momentum for

⁹⁵ Acts 2:38 and 40

⁹⁶ Acts 1:42-43

Gospel proclamation at the heart of life-transforming conversion. And this work of *showing* will require more than exhortation, encouragement and modeling by way of example. Rather, it involves the essential act of interacting with men on *their* exegesis - *their* Word work. For if men are to be truly equipped, we must find ways to engage them in their preparation and progress in preaching. Without the singular work of equipping men for preaching our present day momentum will yield considerably less long term fruit than it might have otherwise.

You may remember the beneficial men's movements of the 1990s. Concerted efforts rapidly grew throughout that decade, numerically culminating in 1997 with approximately 1 million Christian men gathering at the National Mall.⁹⁷ Since then, however, attendance has declined and the spotlight has dimmed. At the same time, there was a very different trend developing. In a 2004 Barna study, just seven years after the peak of the men's movement, it was estimated that the "unchurched" population of American had nearly doubled since 1991—about the time of the beginning of the men's movements.⁹⁸ Who fueled this? The report states: "As might be expected, men dominate the ranks of the unchurched. Although they comprise slightly less than half of the national population, men constitute 55% of the unchurched. They represent only 38% of the born again public, indicating an even wider disparity between those who are most devoted to their faith and those who are least interested in such matters." In other words, the men's movement, for all the good it was able to accomplish and is still doing, nevertheless, came, peaked and fell away. And the net result has been that men are outside the church in greater percentages than before the movement began.

I mention this by way of analogy. For here we are at the center of another massive, encouraging and rising gospel movement among pastors and ministry leaders, and I have to wonder: what ideas, what assumptions, what skills are we leaving the next generation that might help them reach the lost with the gospel? I think part of the answer has got to be a real effort at training men *for preaching* (emphasis intended). This is my final conviction. If we are going to succeed in preparing a generation that is equipped to withstand the pressures of the coming years, every conference and seminar must begin with and flow from that fundamental aspect of pastoral ministry—preaching God's Word. Simply put, we must retool everything we do for pastors around equipping them for the proclamation of God's Word.

CONCLUSION

As I draw this paper to a close, I want to summarize my points thus far. My first three points—"preaching must be done," "prayers must be made," and "power understood"—really are meant to demonstrate the essential nature of the proclamation of God's Word for conversion. My fourth point—"present day praxis must be informed"—begins to describe how we can go about the task of proclaiming God's Word with the effective tools of a robust Biblical theology, a method of contextualization that establishes Biblical categories in conjunction with presenting the gospel to the unchurched (as Paul did in Athens) and the recognition of the centrality of Christ as not just as the means, but as 'the end.' The fifth point demonstrates both

⁹⁷ "Promise Keepers: About Us," n.p. [cited 30 April 2010]. Online: <http://www.promisekeepers.org/about>.

⁹⁸ "Number of Unchurched Adults Has Nearly Doubled Since 1991," n.p. [cited 30 April 2010]. Online: <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/140-number-of-unchurched-adults-has-nearly-doubled-since-199?q=men>.

the Biblical foundation and contemporary need for a focus on training preachers to handle God's Word. So, now we are ready to ask, 'what must we do?'

I am left with this: if the kingdom spreads through conversion *and* conversion comes primarily through the preaching of God's Word—the means by which he mediates his relationship with his people—then, what specifically can we as the Gospel Coalition do to better equip the next generation of gospel preachers?