

Ethics, Preaching, and Biblical Theology

by John M. Frame

At Westminster Seminary, one of the most exciting discoveries students make is the history of redemption or biblical theology. When we come to see Scripture as the history of redemption, we see far more clearly how all of Scripture bears witness to Christ. And biblical theology opens up to us the wonderful vision of the eschatology of redemption: that in Christ the last days are here, and we are dwelling with him in the heavenly places. Redemption has been accomplished already, and its blessings are ours. There is, of course, a “not yet” as well as an “already.” The consummation has come, but it is still yet to come. We live as those who are sanctified, but not perfected.

The tension between the already and the not-yet is the setting of New Testament ethical reflection. God has justified us in Christ and has given us his Spirit; yet sin remains and will not be completely destroyed until the final day. Nevertheless, the “already,” the definitive accomplishment of redemption in Christ is our motivation for obedience.

In our preaching and teaching, we should clearly set forth this framework as the context of ethical decision making.

However, I believe that it is possible to go too far in our emphasis on the history of redemption. Although the two-age structure of Pauline ethics is important, it does not by any means exhaust the biblical teaching relevant to our ethical decisions. There are pages and pages of Scripture devoted to the details of God’s law, to proverbs about the practical life of the believer, to the heart motivations of love and faith that should impel our passion for holiness.

Now some will point out that all these other elements of biblical ethics are to be understood “in the context of” the two-age schema. True enough; but contextual arguments work both ways. If the law and the proverbs are to be understood in the context of the already and not-yet, the opposite is also true: the semi-eschatological tension must be understood in terms of the law of God. It is the law which defines the sinfulness from which Christ redeemed us. And God saves us so that we may keep the law (Rom. 8:4). The law defines *how* we should express our gratitude for Jesus’ redemption.

Should ethical preaching be redemptive-historical? Certainly; but it should also expound God’s laws and the new inner motivations to which we are called. In my terminology, redemptive history is the situational perspective, the situation in

which we make ethical decisions. The law is the normative, and the motive is the existential. All three perspectives should be preached and taught, if Christians are to gain a balanced perspective on Christian ethics.

Should every sermon have redemptive history as its principal subject? I would say no. There is nothing in the Bible itself that requires us to restrict preaching in this way. And there are many ethical passages in Scripture which do not explicitly focus on the eschatological ethical tension — such as Proverbs and some of the ethical passages of the New Testament. We should not demand that a preacher emphasize something that is not emphasized in his text. If one argues that these texts must be seen in the light of the broader biblical principles of redemptive history, again I would reply that the reverse is also true.

Surely we cannot maintain that *every* relevant theological context be brought into the exposition of every text. I believe that if a preacher emphasizes grace in his overall ministry, including the proper relationship between grace and works, it is not wrong for him occasionally to preach on a Proverb, a law, or a norm, without devoting his central attention to the eschatological ethical tension.

There are some passages that are very confusing to modern congregations unless we say something about their redemptive-historical setting. God told Israel under Joshua to kill the Canaanites. Does he tell us to do the same? Certainly not, because the command presupposes a redemptive-historical setting very different from ours. The iniquity of the Canaanite is full; it is time for God's judgment against those nations and the fulfillment of His promise to Abraham. Those conditions don't exist in our relationships with non-Christian neighbors.

So every preacher must be aware of the redemptive-historical setting of his text. But that doesn't imply that the sermon must always be *about* that setting. There is no biblical rule that such settings are the only proper subject-matter of sermons.

And there are dangers in the practice of preaching exclusively on redemptive-historical themes:

1. Much biblical truth can be left out or illegitimately de-emphasized. The preacher does not feel free to dwell on the specifics, say, of Romans 12, because he feels he must spend most of his time of the redemptive-historical setting of the passage (i.e. Romans 1-11).

2. Some redemptive-historical preachers seem to have an antipathy to the very idea of practical application. I don't understand the argument very well.

James Dennison objects to the term “application,” because he believes it had bad connotations in theologies like Schleiermacher’s and Bultmann’s. But criticizing language on such grounds is an instance of genetic fallacy. And Dennison’s proposed alternatives, “participation in the text,” “identification with the text,” have also been used in non-Christian philosophies, particularly those of Plato and the mystics. And the alternative “living in the text” is really too vague to denote a purposeful ethical preaching thrust.

3. If the argument about application were merely a terminological dispute, it would be of little importance. But I get the impression that some who stress redemptive history really want to avoid “practical” application. They want the whole sermon to focus on Christ, not on what works the believer should do. They want it to focus on gospel, not on law. So they want the sermon to evoke praise of Christ, not to demand concrete change in people’s behavior. In their mind, Christocentricity excludes any sustained focus on specific practical matters.

I too think sermons should magnify Christ and evoke praise. But it is simply wrongheaded to deny the importance of concrete, practical, ethical application. Such application is the purpose of Scripture itself, according to 2 Timothy 3:16-17. And since Scripture contains many practical “how tos,” our preaching should include those too. To say that this emphasis detracts from Christocentricity is unscriptural.

Christ is central in Scripture as the Redeemer. But he is also the Word, Wisdom, the Lawgiver, the Lord of the Covenant, the Lion of Judah, the Shepherd who leads his people into the right paths. It is wrong to assume that an emphasis on Christ as Redeemer (redemptive history) excludes an emphasis on Christ as norm and motivator.

When a preacher avoids concrete ethical applications in his sermons, he is not preaching the whole counsel of God, and he is not adequately edifying his people.

The best redemptive-historical preachers understand this. Some of the most powerful ethical preaching I have heard has come from Ed Clowney and Jim Dennison.

4. Some redemptive-historical preachers develop a jargon-laden vocabulary. One recent WTS graduate preached a sermon in chapel a year or so ago in which he used the word “eschatological” about fifty times (at least it felt like that), and a lot of other technical biblical-theological jargon. Maybe he thought that was all right, or even an advantage, with an audience of seminarians.

My guess is that seminarians tend to tune out to such discourses — they have heard all of that many times. But so facile was the young preacher with this language, I feared that he preached this way in his own congregation. If he did, I fear that anyone who visited the service would have been entirely bewildered.

In my view it is best to avoid jargon in preaching generally. And one can make the relevant points about redemptive history without all the technical terms. Most evangelical preachers emphasize: (a) that God forgives all the sins of everyone who believes in Christ; (b) that we nevertheless need to continue fighting the spiritual warfare (in our hearts and our society) until the return of Jesus; and (c) that the redemptive work of Christ is what motivates us to pursue holiness. I believe that those truths constitute the essence of the “already/not-yet,” and this language communicates the truth far more effectively than does the jargon.

5. Excess enthusiasm for redemptive history has sometimes produced division in churches and presbyteries. Some pastors not only preach redemptive history, but they condemn as moralistic anybody who fails to emphasize it as much as they do. So “redemptive history” becomes a party label, and factions battle over the concept. In my opinion, this partisanship is wrong.

Why is it, I wonder, that in our circles whenever anybody gets an interesting idea, it produces a party that makes it a test of orthodoxy, leading to another party that opposes it, and then to battles between these parties in the churches? Why can't those who think they have new insights quietly teach their insights to others while embracing them as brothers and sisters in Christ? If some don't “get it,” why should that amount to heresy? Why not simply permit both views to be taught until the Spirit convinces God's people generally that one view is Scriptural and the other is not?

In recent Reformed history, we have had these partisan battles over Van Til's apologetics (and now, different *schools* of Van Tillian apologetics), common grace, the incomprehensibility of God, supra-/infralapsarianism, theonomy, the relation between grace and law in the covenants, Shepherd's view of justification, nouthetic counseling, exclusive Psalmody, contemporary worship, means of church growth, redemptive-historical preaching. None of these is resolved in our Reformed confessions, but partisans act as if they were. They think their view alone is orthodox, and their opponents are dangerous heretics. Can't we just lighten up a bit? Can we never admit our fallibility? Is there not a place, on some issues, for teachability, even tolerance? Can't we ever agree to disagree in peace and love, working together on those matters where we agree?

The term “moralism” needs more examination. In my estimation, preachers who stress points (a) through (c) above under #4 should not be called moralistic. “Moralism” was a term associated particularly with the social gospel liberals of the Ritschlian school of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They had no gospel at all. To use that term of principled evangelicals of our own time, I believe, is an injustice.

I think that a preacher is moralistic if in his ministry: (1) there is no substantial emphasis on salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone; (2) there is no substantial emphasis on the points mentioned above in 4 (a)-(c); or (3) his sermons regularly err because of his failure to understand the redemptive-historical context of his texts. If any one of these characterizes his preaching, I would call him moralistic.

As I said above, however, I don’t believe that every sermon must be *about* redemptive history. If a congregation is well-informed about the biblical relation of grace and works, I don’t see why the pastor might not occasionally focus on, say, an ethical text, without dwelling at great length on the redemptive-historical setting. To call a pastor moralistic because he preaches such sermons is wrong, in my view. And to call a pastor moralistic because he does not use the *jargon* of biblical theology is slanderous.

And I would reiterate that neglecting the redemptive-historical context is in my view no worse a sin than neglecting the normative or existential contexts of biblical ethics.

6. An exclusive emphasis on redemptive history can become repetitious and tiresome, especially when it is jargon-laden.

7. For some reason, it seems to me that enthusiasts for redemptive history are often poor logicians. In some sermons, presbytery speeches, student papers, even some published treatises, I have often heard elaborate citations of Scripture, “alreadys” and “not-yets,” Messianic this and Eschatological that, and then at the end some conclusion (a doctrinal, ethical, or procedural point) that doesn’t have much at all to do with the redemptive-historical argumentation.

8. Young preachers who try to preach redemptive-historical sermons often spend so much time preparing the theology of their messages that they completely neglect rhetorical considerations, i.e. *communication*. So, their sermons come across as a lot of gobbledygook. The redemptive-historical method of preaching typically takes much more preparation time than others. And at its best it requires substantial intellectual and rhetorical gifts which few

seminarians and young pastors possess. When average preachers with busy schedules try to prepare redemptive-historical sermons, the result is often incomprehensible. Now, you can say what you like about the dangers of neglecting redemptive history; but a sermon that does not communicate with the people is not preaching at all.

So, all I ask of a young preacher is that he preach clearly the gospel of grace, a proper relation between grace and works, and no major errors stemming from redemptive-historical ignorance. These are simple goals, well within the abilities of seminary trained young men whom God has called to the ministry. When a preacher accomplishes these goals, he may not fairly be accused of moralism. His preaching will be biblical and effective.

I think it is usually counter-productive for young preachers to try to emulate the profundity of Clowney or Dennison. It is better in the early years of ministry to recognize your own limitations and to seek what's most important: clear communication of the biblical gospel.