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Christ-Centered Sermons: Models of Redemptive Preaching (Book Review)

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A quarterly faculty publication of
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was repeatedly evident during the course of public debate.

One of the author's great strengths is in pausing in his chronology to explain procedures and historic context for the reader. While hardly a textbook, this thoroughness significantly helps the reader who comes with a basic understanding of the workings of Congress. As his story unfolds, Kaiser reveals his favor for the substance of the bill, but his criticisms fall upon nearly all the participants in an evenhanded way.

We may credit Dodd-Frank for making substantial improvements in a flawed regulatory environment, but the effort and accomplishment fall short of the injunctions from the prophet Amos to "let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" There has been a remarkable lack of concern for penalties upon the exploiters or

for provisions to make up the losses to those who were deprived by unjust mortgages or for interest that was foregone. The political players were content with a secular rebalancing of political interests in a system that previously drifted away from regulation into exploitation. A more thorough vision for creational renewal is not present in this legislative story.

Speaking as one who desires a successful, just, effective, and trusted Congress, I find it disquieting to acknowledge that the Congress and its members typically quoted in the news media mostly mouth talking points to claim credit and avoid political blame. Substantive discussions of public justice in matters of policy are extraordinarily rare. Neither Kaiser nor I have easy remedies for this lack. I do, however, recommend *Act of Congress* as an enlightening read about the contemporary American legislative process.

Chapell, Bryan, *Christ-Centered Sermons: Models of Redemptive Preaching*. Ada, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013. ISBN: 978-080148692. Reviewed by Reverend Mark Verbruggen, Pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church, Sioux Center, Iowa, and adjunct with the Dordt Theology Department.

Every week, thousands of sermons are preached across the United States. People from every walk of life come together in churches to hear a portion from the Bible read and to hear someone preach a sermon based on that reading of the Word. Why do they come? Why do they subject themselves to a sermon drawn from a Bible reading? Generally speaking, people do not come in such numbers to other public forums. Lectures given on topics derived from works of literature, science, or some other academic discipline do not attract nearly the number of listeners as does the preaching of the Word occurring weekly in churches. There is surely something about the *sermon* that draws people to come and hear. Perhaps that is because the purpose of preaching is not like any other speaking event. Yes, some Christians do go to church because such attendance is a spiritual habit. But a sermon is not mere information about a topic or situation. It is more than that. It is a Christ-centered event.

Though thousands of sermons are preached every week, how many of them are focused on the *main thing*, that being the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Bryan Chapell, author of *Christ-Centered Sermons*, argues in his introduction that true Gospel preaching is not simply a lecture but an encounter with God. If God is real and the Word of God is living and active, then God is active in the preaching of his Word. The power of preaching is not in the preacher himself

but in the God who speaks through the preacher to convict the heart, renew the mind, and strengthen the will. Chapell calls each occurrence of these effects a "redemptive event." Sermons can lift listeners from the mundane things of this life to a view of God that brings new life to them and the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

With *Christ-Centered Sermons*, Chapell, senior pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church in Peoria, Illinois, has given us a helpful *how-to book* for preachers. Yet anyone who values preaching or who has ever wondered what makes for a good sermon will appreciate the insights offered in this book. Church leaders—including elders, deacons, and Sunday School teachers—will find this book helpful. After a brief introduction, in which Chapell explains what preaching ought to be, the remainder of the book consists of thirteen example sermons written by Chapell himself. God, he argues, is active in his Word, so we should "preach with the conviction that the Spirit of God will use the truths of his Word *as we preach* to change hearts now!" (x). The sermons that follow Chapell's introduction are written with this conviction. Each of them comes with explanatory notes that explain why and how sermons are organized, and when and how to use illustrations in sermons. The book's other notes include how to use "Prayers for Illumination," or prayers during worship specifically about the sermon; how to introduce the

Scripture reading; and how to introduce the sermon itself.

The book's example sermons show clearly Chapell's gift for Christ-centered preaching. I will not offer a review of every sermon, but one that I found particularly intriguing was "Example Sermon Four," which Chapell introduced as a "Topical Sermon for a Special Occasion" (55-69). When I first read that this would be a "topical sermon," I nearly skipped over it. After all, I am passionate about Reformed expository preaching and find myself turned off by sermons centered around particular topics. Ordinarily, topical sermons are more about the preacher's opinion on a subject than about the Word of God. And if listeners want to know the "keys to a successful marriage" or "how to raise healthy and happy children," they can buy books on those ever-popular topics. Chapell understands this concern as well. In the introduction to one of his topical sermons, he tells us that "[t]he danger of a topical sermon is that it may drift into expressing personal or popular opinion. Because the message is not anchored to a biblical text, the preacher may float free from biblical truths." This point was quite easy for me to agree with. But then, Chapell says topical sermons are "*not* inherently" opinion-based and that good preachers should attempt to preach them on occasion. This point at first struck me as an odd comment, and I didn't know whether or not to believe him. Chapell adds, though, that a topical sermon can be very biblical, but whether it is or not is more a consequence of the speaker's commitments than a consequence of the sermon's structure. He followed this point with an example topical sermon based on Psalm 126, one entitled "The Glory of the Lord," which Chapell preached in an African-American congregation in 2009, on the eve of the inauguration of President Barack Obama.

As a preacher living in Northwest Iowa—a place and culture that will vote predominately for Republicans—this sermon was not only fascinating to read but transformative to my mind. I had never thought about how that political event would speak to the theology of a Christian community that was very different from mine. As I read the sermon, I began to realize how much context and culture will affect how we hear the Word of God. The words of this sermon were filled with power and passion, as the biblical text was spoken into the context of the times and the congregation. In Chapell's sermon we hear such passion expressed in eloquent biblical language: "The glory of the Lord comes to earth and rings in heaven when the church is the

multicolored body of Christ that God intends. The faith solution requires the body of Christ to love one another despite our differences and to help one another despite our distance." Chapell applies this overarching point to the immediate sociopolitical context by adding substantive comments about reactions to the presidential election: "I don't know how it will happen, but I do not believe that we, as the body of Christ, will have a more important time to express this love than during the next few years. I cannot imagine but that President Obama's racial background will be used by some to divide, deride, and suppress. If he makes a mistake, some will immediately blame his race. If he is challenged, some will immediately charge racism. If he is *not* challenged, some will immediately assume racial privilege" (66-67).

So how do we evaluate preaching? What makes a sermon "good"? Chapell's view is that our preaching should not be judged primarily by what people sense, learn, or remember from the sermon. Instead, after hearing a good sermon, we are compelled to think about how we now live. How do we become "living letters" of the Truth we have heard? How can our day-to-day lives bring "gospel" into the places we live, work, and play? Chapell answers that "[t]he preacher's obligation to *transform* as well as *inform* should compel us to ensure that our sermons are instruments of empowering grace and conduits for needed truth" (xi). Earlier in this review, I mentioned that Chapell says that preaching is a "redemptive event." When I came across this particular phrase, I knew that this book would be one that I would be glad to read. There is something special about the sermon. If it is rooted in the Word of God and delivered in the power of the Holy Spirit, it is not mere words to the wind. The sermon has power because God's Word is powerful. It is a "redemptive event" that brings grace and truth into this world's time and space. As a preacher myself, I must believe that it can change hearts and lives. In a culture that celebrates celebrity, it is no surprise that even preachers have felt the pressure to be a celebrity of sorts. Anyone with access to a television or the internet can watch all kinds of *celebrity preachers* preach their sermons to massive crowds. There is a temptation to be an entertainer from the pulpit, a method that might draw in big crowds. We might even conclude, from watching celebrity preachers, that success is determined by the number of people drawn in by the preacher. However, and Chapell probably concurs with this, we know that the size of

the crowd has nothing to do with whether or not the sermon is really a “redemptive event.”

Although Chapell writes this book primarily for preachers, they are far from the only ones who will benefit from this gem of a book. All who love the Church, love the Word of God, and are passionate about seeing that Word declared in power will benefit from reading this book. One group I have in mind are those who serve as elders in their particular congregations. In the Reformed tradition, elders are ultimately charged with overseeing the preaching of the Word in their congregation. The form for the “Ordination of Elders and Deacons” from the Christian Reformed Church, for example, says that

“[e]lders are responsible for the spiritual well-being of God’s people. They must provide true preaching and teaching, regular celebration of the sacraments, and faithful counsel and discipline.” Therefore elders, too, would benefit from Chapell’s book because they are to be keen listeners of the sermon in order to make sure it is truly based on the Word of God, accurate according to sound doctrine, and affective in encouraging the people to be agents of transformation in all of life. Perhaps Chapell’s book can be a starting point for them to ensure that sermons are not merely words to the wind or entertainment but truly transformative, Christ-encountering events!