

The Christocentric Principle: Promise, Pitfalls, and Proposal

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Abstract

This article is a response to ‘The Christocentric Principle: A Jesus-Centred Hermeneutic’ (Peppler 2012). The author argues that the christocentric principle holds much promise as an interpretive tool for all branches of evangelical theology. The article then identifies two potential pitfalls in the way the christocentric principle might be used, namely, (a) treating the gospels as a canon within a canon and (b) imposing a distorted picture of Christ upon other biblical texts. It is proposed that these pitfalls can be avoided if the rest of the canon is allowed to inform the christocentric principle, just as the christocentric principle often guides our interpretation of the rest of the canon.

Introduction

Dr Christopher Peppler founded the South African Theological Seminary (SATS) on three pillars, summed in our by-line as Bible-based, Christ-centred, and Spirit-led. As an evangelical seminary offering Master’s and Doctoral degrees in theology, we have stressed the Bible-based aspect, partly to distinguish ourselves from the more liberal approaches that predominate in the theological departments of South African universities. In 2011, Peppler challenged the seminary to

think about what it means for us to be Christ-centred. Four points emerged:

- In all we do, we seek to give due honour and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The goal of the Christian life is to become like the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ is central to all Christian life, doctrine, and ministry.
- The nature of God as revealed in the words and works of the Lord Jesus Christ is a lens for interpreting God's word and discerning his will.

The first three points were readily agreed, but a robust debate ensued around the fourth point, which takes christocentricity as a hermeneutic. The debate culminated in Peppler's (2012) article 'The Christocentric Principle: A Jesus-Centred Hermeneutic'.

This article is a response to Peppler's proposals for a christocentric hermeneutic. It has three objectives: to (a) affirm the promise of the christocentric principle as a hermeneutical tool; (b) identify two potential pitfalls; and (c) propose a refinement to prevent the pitfalls producing problems.

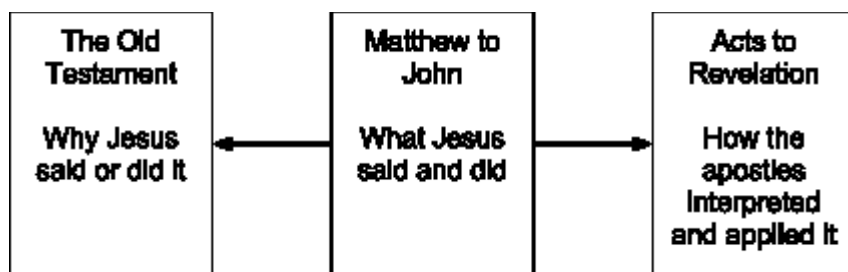
1. The Promise

The christocentric principle holds much promise for the way we undertake the tasks of evangelical theology. As I understand it, the overarching task of theology is to discern God's nature, will, and purposes so that his people might respond in ways that are faithful (Hendriks 2004; Osborne 2006; Sailhamer 2010; Smith 2011a). This is

the task of all the sub-disciplines of theology, with each sub-discipline contributing a particular perspective to the overall task of discerning God's will (Heyns and Pieterse 1991:4). Therefore, any hermeneutical tool that helps us to discern the will of God and respond faithfully is a valuable addition to our theological toolkit.

The christocentric principle, as developed and described by Peppler (2012), can aid theological reflection in all branches of theology. It is a hermeneutical tool to help God's people to interpret texts, practices, and situations. It serves as something of a hermeneutical compass, orienting us towards a proper understanding of God's will and purposes for his people.

Peppler (2007:177–188) originally formulated the christocentric principle as a model for doing a topical study of what the Word of God teaches. His original model looked like this:



The idea was simple. Since the words and works of the Lord Jesus Christ constituted the climax of God's acts of self-revelation, providing the clearest picture of the nature, will, and purposes of God, we should begin a topical study by considering what Jesus said and did. We should then turn to the Old Testament, which enables us to contextualise Christ's words and works within the unfolding plan and purposes of God. The Old Testament provides the rationale for Jesus's words and

works; it helps us to understand 'the why' behind his revelatory life and deeds. Last, we should consider the remainder of the New Testament (Acts to Revelation). These books reveal how the inspired writers of the New Testament interpreted and applied the words and works of Jesus Christ to various situations and contexts.

This 'first edition' of the christocentric principle was essentially a model for doing systematic theology, a way of considering what the whole Bible taught about a given question or topic. It is Christ-centred in two senses. First, unlike the more traditional way of tracing the teachings of God's Word, either canonically or chronologically, it starts with the words and works of the Lord Jesus Christ. Each order of study has its merits, and each will likely result in some unique emphases and perspectives. Second, it provides a Christ-centred vision of the canon, and the relationship between the major *corpi* within the canon. These two factors increase the likelihood that we shall interpret the totality of God's revelation in the light of his climactic self-disclosure in Christ. This makes it an appealing way of doing evangelical systematic theology, because it is both canonical and christocentric. It promises a theological interpretation that is based on the whole Bible, but which also gives due credence to the christocentric nature of all God's revelation.

With respect to the twin fields of Old and New Testament studies, the christocentric principle is once again a helpful hermeneutical compass. Many texts take on a clearer meaning if we read them with the presupposition that their Spirit-inspired, God-intended meaning is in full harmony with all that we know about the nature, will, and purposes of the triune God as most fully unveiled in the life and teachings of God the Son. We are less likely to misinterpret difficult texts if we continuously ask ourselves: how does everything I know about God

through his incarnation (Christ's words and works) inform what the Spirit was saying through the text I am studying?

In practical theology, we study both present and preferred praxis in an attempt to ensure that it is faithful to the nature and purposes of God (Swinton and Mowatt 2006:6). In this regard, the christocentric principle seems to be a valuable lens for interpreting present praxis and envisioning preferred praxis. With reference to present praxis, we can attempt to discern what Christ is doing in the church, on the premise that he is continuing his mission and ministry (John 20:21; Acts 1:1–3; Heb 13:8). Anderson (2001) calls this 'christopraxis'. We are essentially analysing present praxis by asking two questions: (1) what is Jesus saying and doing? (2) What would Jesus say and do? With respect to the preferred praxis, practical theological reflection should culminate with answers to Browning's (1993) two key questions: (1) What should we do? (2) How should we live? By focusing attention on the canonical portrait of Jesus Christ as the fullest revelation of God's nature, will, and purposes, the christocentric principle ought to be a valuable aid to for interpreting Christian praxis.

As an interpretive lens, the christocentric principle thus holds promise for various branches of theology. It helps with our interpretation of scripture, theology, ethics, and praxis. For the past three years, I have been working on models of integrated theology—approaches to theological reflection that bring together insights and perspectives from multiple sub-disciplines. Pepler's (2012) christocentric principle promises to be a helpful building block in that quest.

Part of its promise is that the christocentric principle may well approach the way in which the apostles 'did theology'. Did they not interpret the Old Testament and interpret their contemporary obligations through the light provided by Christ, with special reference to his death and

resurrection? They were reflective practitioners whose beliefs and practices were pervasively shaped by their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament writings, from Acts to Revelation, are themselves applications of the christocentric principle. How did Luke, Paul, Peter, John, and so on formulate their theology? They were pastoral theologians doing integrated theology using a christocentric approach. They interpreted the mission of God, the Old Testament scriptures, their present praxis, and the church's responsibilities christocentrically.

Paver (2006:27) proposes a vision of integrated theology that sees pastoral leaders as practical theologians, using the twin terms 'practical Christian thinker' and 'reflective practitioner' to describe them. This description certainly fits the authors of the New Testament, with the additional observation that their thinking was thoroughly christocentric. How wonderful it would be if the outcome of our theological education were practical Christian thinkers and reflective practitioners who interpret every aspect of the Word and the world christocentrically (Smith 2011b).

2. The Pitfalls

The preceding discussion should make it clear that the christocentric principle holds great promise as an interpretive key for evangelical theology. However, there are two potential pitfalls to avoid.

2.1. The danger of a canon within a canon

The christocentric principle might leave us vulnerable to forming a canon within a canon. We might develop a two-tier approach to the scriptures in which we treat the gospels as superior revelation to the

remainder of the scriptures. As evangelical interpreters, the whole canon of scripture, soundly interpreted, is our norm for belief and behaviour. The completed canon is the Word of God to the people of God. We are the people of the book, and the completed canon is our final and sufficient record of God's revelation to us. Therefore, we have a canonical approach to theology. The completed canon is the locus of theology.

The danger is red-letter theology. In emphasising Christ as the full and final revelation of the God (which he is), the christocentric principle can lead to a theological praxis in which the gospels are treated as more inspired than the other scriptures. What Jesus said and did is 'grade A' revelation. What Moses or Paul wrote is 'grade B'—still inspired, but less important. This could lead to the glorification of the gospels, and theology based on a canon within the canon. Theologians who do not accept the full inspiration and authority of all scripture sometimes adopt a similar approach, viewing the gospel (the Christ-life or the Christ-event) as the true revelation that corrects the misrepresentation of God in earlier writings. However, for those who hold the entire canon to be trustworthy and authoritative, singling out the gospels as somehow superior will create problems. Because of the principle of progressive revelation and the promise-fulfilment plot line of the Bible, we do recognise that the gospels are more pivotal to the formulation of Christian theology than the Old Testament Scriptures (Heb. 1:1-3). However, I do not think it is sound to adopt a similar attitude towards the relationship between the gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

To see the christocentric principle as endorsing a canon within a canon is *to confuse revelation with inspiration*. The incarnation is the focal point of all God's acts of revelation. In Old Testament times, he revealed himself piecemeal through his words and works across time,

but in Christ, he provided us with the most concrete and comprehensive unveiling of his nature, will, and purposes. The Old Testament as a whole finds its full explanation in Christ, and the whole New Testament interprets the significance of Christ. Christ is the key to understanding the full canon correctly, but the gospels are not the 'real' canon. The life of Christ is the supreme locus of revelation, but the canon must remain the locus of theology.

Peppler (2012) is *not* advocating a canon within a canon. The christocentric principle provides a hermeneutical key to unlock the proper interpretation of the canon. The canon as a whole remains the inspired, truthful, and authoritative Word of God. The canon provides the normative source material for theology. The christocentric principle recognises that the life of Christ provides the clearest understanding of the nature, will, and purposes of God, and thus, serves as a lens for interpreting the whole canon correctly. Thus the christocentric principle presupposes a canonical approach to doing theology, but contends that Christ is the interpretive key to understanding the canonical message correctly.

2.2. The danger of a distorted portrait of Christ

The christocentric principle advocates that we interpret all scripture in the light of the full and final revelation of God in Christ. Since Jesus Christ was God incarnate, the nature, will, and purposes of God most clearly seen through his words and works. When Jesus taught clearly and definitively regarding a particular matter, we have a sound basis for deploying the christocentric principle as an interpretive key. However, when Jesus did not speak or act in a way that directly reveals God's attitude and heart regarding something, the christocentric principle relies on abstracting an understanding of how Jesus would view the matter or what he might have said about it. Deploying the christocentric

principle in such instances may still be helpful, but it is more vulnerable to error since the interpreter is imposing an abstracted portrait of Christ upon the subject matter.

In Numbers 15:32–36, Yahweh commands the congregation to stone a man who was caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath. If we take seriously that God's nature does not change (Mal 3:6; Heb 13:8) and that Jesus Christ revealed God's nature, then, Yahweh's command in Numbers 15:35 must be consistent with Jesus's declaration that 'the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27). According to the christocentric principle, any interpretation of Numbers 15:35 that does not harmonise with the clear teaching of Jesus must be deemed inadequate. The Numbers text cannot mean that God was a vindictive, pedantic legalist in 1400 BC, since the life and teaching of Jesus Christ clearly show that he is not.¹ There must be more to the Numbers text. The christocentric principle calls us to dig deeper, and it guides our excavation. In this example from Numbers, the christocentric principle works optimally because the Lord Jesus Christ taught clearly about the will of God with respect to the Sabbath.

However, there are instances in which we do not have such definitive statements from Christ. In 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 Paul acknowledged that he did not have a word from Christ to guide his thinking; he was left to offer his own Spirit-guided perspective. In these cases, the christocentric principle can still be helpful in that we know enough

¹ Theologians who do not hold a high view of scripture would say that the Numbers text is in error, and Jesus's teaching is corrective. For those of us who believe that the Holy Spirit stands behind all scripture as its ultimate Author, such an explanation is unacceptable. We must assume that God holds a united perspective regarding the Sabbath, and that the two seemingly conflicting texts can be harmonised—with the perspective Jesus provides somehow serving as the key to resolution.

about the life and teaching of Jesus Christ to offer a calculated guess as to how we might handle the case. Although it is speculation, it seems likely that Paul's prayerful consideration of what to say to believers in the situation he addresses in verses 12–16 would have included asking the question: how does all that I know about the words and works of Jesus Christ help me to understand the Lord's will in this case?

The potential pitfall here is that we have to extract or abstract our understanding of Jesus Christ from the gospels (and the rest of the New Testament). The abstracted vision of Jesus Christ then becomes a basis for evaluating potential interpretations of other texts. If our interpretation of the nature of Christ is flawed, we shall superimpose that flawed understanding upon the teaching of other texts, thus, distorting their meaning too.

For the sake of argument, let us imagine that there were no texts in the gospels in which Christ taught about eternal judgement. Let us also imagine that an interpreter concludes from her study of the gospels that eternal judgement is incompatible with the love of God as embodied in the life of Christ. When the same interpreter then encounters Revelation 20:11–15, she may wrongly conclude that it cannot be teaching eternal judgement, since that would be incompatible with her view of Christ. This hypothetical example illustrates the potential pitfall—assuming that the natural meaning of a text of scripture cannot be the intended meaning because it does not seem to fit *our view* of Christ.

3. The Proposal

The two pitfalls outlined in the previous section by no means invalidate the christocentric principle. The principle remains a valuable hermeneutical tool. In this section, I want to propose one refinement to

the christocentric principle as outlined by Peppler (2012). I hope the refinement will help to minimise the risk of the two pitfalls. The refinement is that, *to some extent, and in some instances, the rest of the canon needs to inform the christocentric principle, just as the christocentric principle often guides our interpretation of the rest of the canon.*

To some extent, we need to extract our portrait of Jesus Christ from the whole New Testament, and not just from the gospels. As eye-witnesses and first-hand recipients of revelation, the apostles interpreted and applied the life of Christ in the church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. All the New Testament writings are overtly christocentric, and are based on first-hand apostolic interpretations of Christ's life. For example, the gospels contain no teachings by Jesus about order within marriage and family, but they do contain many examples of Jesus treating women with dignity and value atypical of his time and culture. Some may conclude that Jesus did not believe in male headship. Having reached this conclusion about Jesus, they might use the christocentric principle to argue that Old and New Testament texts which appear to teach male headship in marriage must be interpreted otherwise. This, however, would be an irresponsible and invalid application of the christocentric principle. We should not use a dubious assumption about Jesus abstracted from indirect evidence to nullify the plain meaning of other scriptures. Rather, we must allow passages like Ephesians 5:22–33 and 1 Peter 3:1–7 to complement the picture of Jesus painted in the gospels. The Lord Jesus Christ affirmed the dignity and value of women and opposed all forms of abuse and exploitation, but he did not overturn the other biblical teachings about family order. Allowing other texts to round out our understanding of Christ in areas where the gospels are silent or ambiguous does not undermine the intent of the christocentric principle; it strengthens and affirms it.

The christocentric principle needs to cut both ways—Christ's life informs our interpretation of other scriptures, but other scriptures also inform our interpretation of Christ's life. As formulated, the principle advocates that we interpret all scripture in the light of what the words and works of Jesus Christ reveal about the nature, will, and purposes of God. Since the life of Christ is the climactic self-revelation of God to man, it rightly serves as a framework and a lens for understanding God's other acts of self-disclosure. With this, I am in full agreement. However, sometimes the gospels provide us with an incomplete or inconclusive portrait of Christ's attitudes or thoughts regarding something. In such cases, it is dangerous to reinterpret what seem to be clear teachings in other scriptures to conform to our abstracted understanding of what Jesus Christ is like. Rather, we should take those clear teachings as reliable records of God's nature, and use them to correct or complete our portrait of Christ.

1 Peter 3:1–6 furnishes another example of the proposed refinement to the christocentric principle. If the gospels are read in isolation, the radical, confrontational ministry style of Jesus, together with his claims that he had come to divide families (e.g. Matt 10:34–36; Luke 14:26–27), might lead us to believe that Jesus would want believing wives to evangelise their unbelieving husbands aggressively. Peter, however, writing as one who knew Jesus rather well, shows that the Lord does not expect wives to use confrontational method of witnessing to their unsaved husbands. Instead, Peter tells believing wives to 'be subject to your own husbands, so that ... they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives' (1 Pet 3:1, ESV). Peter knew the Lord Jesus Christ intimately, and here he interprets and applies what he understood of the Lord's will and ways to the question of how unbelieving wives should witness to their husbands. Peter's counsel here must be understood as part of the New Testament's interpretation of the Lord

Jesus Christ. In this instance, we must allow Peter's letter to help us interpret the gospel accounts of Christ, not the other way around.

Conclusion

This article affirms the potential and promise of the christocentric principle as a hermeneutical tool for doing evangelical theology. It has direct value for rightly interpreting the Word of God, which affects the fields of biblical studies and systematic theology. It has less direct value for interpreting present and preferred praxis—what Christ is doing and what he would have his people do. If the objective of theological formation is to equip thinking practitioners who can do integrated theology, then the christocentric principle is a valuable tool.

There are two pitfalls for practitioners wishing to deploy the christocentric principle. The first is the danger of allowing the gospels to become a canon within the canon, treating them as superior revelation to the rest of the Bible, even to the rest of the New Testament. The second danger is that a flawed portrait of Christ might be imposed upon the clear teachings of other texts, resulting in distortion rather than clarity. The proposed solution is that, to some extent, and in some instances, the rest of the canon needs to inform the christocentric principle, just as the christocentric principle often guides our interpretation of the rest of the canon. This refinement is in keeping with the spirit of the christocentric principle, which presupposes a canonical approach to doing theology, but contends that Christ is the interpretive key to understanding the canonical message correctly.

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