

The Christocentric Principle: A Jesus-Centred Hermeneutic

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Abstract

There are many different understandings of the word ‘christocentric’, both among past and current scholars. In this article, the author aligns with those who regard the life, teaching, and person of the Lord Jesus Christ as the locus of doctrinal formulation and proclamation, but applies this approach specifically to the hermeneutic enterprise. The key contention is that scripture should be interpreted primarily from the perspective of either of Jesus’ character, values, principles, and priorities as revealed directly or indirectly by the biblical revelation of what he said and did. This is called the ‘christocentric principle’. The article proceeds from interacting with other scholars who hold a similar view, to identifying the biblical support for the argument, to a brief example of how the principle can be applied. Before concluding, the author deals briefly with some objections to the central idea espoused.

Introduction

My intention in this article is, firstly, to examine the different understandings of the word ‘christocentric’, and then to provide a definition of what I have called the ‘christocentric principle’. I then interact with various scholarly understandings of similar hermeneutical

formulations before providing biblical support for my contentions and considering the practical application of the christocentric principle. Before concluding, I address some possible objections to what I have proposed.

The term 'christocentric' means different things to different people, applied to the theologies of past scholars such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and Bonhoeffer. The wide range of theological positions flying under the flag of 'christocentricity' indicates that the word does not mean the same to everyone and it does not necessarily imply a uniform hermeneutical approach.

Bruce McCormack identifies a difference between what he calls 'formal' and 'material' christological centrality. Formally, christocentricity means that christology is central to a particular theology. However, materially, the meaning of christocentricity differs because the doctrine of Christ, although central, differs from one christocentric theologian to the next (Cortez 2007:2). This partially explains why one may regard both Barth and Schleiermacher as christocentric in their approach to theology, although their theologies are substantially different.

Cortez quotes McCormack's definition of Barth's particular form of christocentrism as his

attempt to understand every doctrine from a centre in God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ; i.e. from a centre in God's act of veiling and unveiling in Christ ... 'Christocentrism', for him, was a methodological rule ... in accordance with which one presupposes a particular understanding of God's Self-revelation in reflecting upon each and every other doctrinal topic, and seeks to interpret

those topics in the light of what is already known of Jesus Christ (2007:5).

In his monumental work *Church dogmatics*, Barth wrote that 'theology must begin with Jesus Christ, and not with general principles, however better, or, at any rate, more relevant and illuminating they may appear to be: as though He were a continuation of the knowledge and Word of God, and not its root and origin, not indeed the very Word of God itself' (1957:II.2.p. fn. 4)

A christocentric focus is not just the distinctive of past theologians and Christian practitioners such as Barth. Dane Orland (2009:3) comments on recent christocentric enterprises and notes that their common denominator is 'a conviction that the Bible will be properly understood, faithfully preached, and rightly applied only if the enfleshed second person of the Trinity is seen as the integrative North Star to Christian doctrine and practice.' However, just as there were differences in the understanding of christocentricity, as practised by past theologians, so there are equally marked differences in the understandings of current scholars. For instance, Alan Miller (2010:3) cites Goldsworthy's view that 'all texts in the whole bible bear a discernible relationship to Christ and are primarily intended as a testimony to Christ'. The way Miller states this approach is that 'Christ must stand as the big idea of *every* text' (p. 2). However, other current christocentric scholars see things differently. For instance, Bryan Chapell, influenced by the work of Sidney Griedanus, has written a book titled *Christ-centred preaching*, in which he warns of attempting to find Jesus in every biblical account (1994:292). He contends that a passage of scripture retains its christocentric focus not because of its implied or imagined reference to Christ, but rather, because the text serves to contribute to the great unfolding revelation of the divine work in and through Jesus Christ. In

other words, all parts of the Bible are christocentric because the Bible is an integrated and progressive revelation which has Christ as its central theme.

Essentially, the various past and current christocentric approaches fall into two categories:

1. Those who regard the life, teaching, and person of the Lord Jesus Christ as the locus of doctrinal formulation and proclamation, i.e. Barth and Chapell.
2. Those who hold that all of scripture must be read as revealing something about Jesus Christ and his saving work, i.e. Augustine and Goldsworthy.

My own understanding of christocentricity embraces the first of these categories, but the christocentric principle applies this approach specifically to the hermeneutic enterprise.

1. Definition

What I refer to as the Christocentric Principle is an approach to biblical interpretation that seeks to understand all parts of scripture from a Jesus-perspective. In other words, it is a way of *interpreting scripture primarily from the perspective of what Jesus taught and modelled, and from what he revealed concerning the nature, character, values, principles, and priorities of the Godhead.*

The main idea here is that we should interpret all of scripture from the perspective of what Jesus reveals of the nature of the Godhead. What we know of God's character, values, principles, and priorities must govern our understanding of what we believe the Bible is teaching in all its parts. Jesus Christ is the 'exact representation' of God's being (Heb

1:3) and so we know God's nature by considering the words and works of the Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament.

In his article 'The canonical sense of scripture: Trinitarian or Christocentric?' Alan Padget (2006:39) quotes TF Torrance as writing in 'The Trinitarian faith' that, 'Since the Scriptures are the result of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by the will of the Father through Jesus Christ, and since the Word of God who speaks through all the Scriptures became incarnate in Jesus Christ, it is Jesus Christ himself who must constitute the controlling centre in all right interpretation of the Scriptures'. I concur with this.

Roger Olson (2011:105), writing in *Against Calvinism: rescuing God's reputation from radical Reformed Theology*, states the case even more forcibly from a negative perspective; 'the doctrine of the incarnation proves that God's character is fully revealed in Jesus such that "No interpretation of any passage [in the Bible] that undercuts the revelations of the divine mind inculcated by Jesus can be accepted as valid. What he says and does is what God says and does"'. He is quoting here from WG MacDonald's article, 'The biblical doctrine of Election'.

Padget, Torrance, Olson, and MacDonald seem to hold to a similar definition of Christocentricism as mine.

The christocentric principle is an attempt to interpret the Bible primarily through the lens of Jesus's life and teaching. In this way, Jesus is placed as the author, dominant subject, and principle interpreter of scripture. Most of the other forms of christocentricity that I have mentioned tend to see Jesus Christ as the object of scripture, but not necessarily as its interpreter. In other words, they see the Bible as a revelation of Jesus Christ, but not Jesus as the 'revealer' of what the Bible teaches.

Ray Anderson (2001) adopts a similar position to mine, but focuses additionally and more specifically on establishing biblical interpretation through the lens of the current work of the Spirit in the life of Christians and the church. He calls this 'Christopraxis', and defines it essentially in two dimensions. First, he says it is 'the normative and authoritative grounding of all theological reflection in the divine act of God consummated in Jesus Christ' (p. 54). He then completes his definition with a second dimension: 'and continued through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ' (p. 54). He writes further that 'we must remember that Jesus is not only the "author" of Scripture through the power of the Spirit, but he himself is a "reader" and interpreter of Scripture in every contemporary moment' (p. 54). Anderson's christopraxis includes the idea of interpreting life through the lens of what Jesus taught and modelled, but focuses more on what the living Lord is saying through contemporary church life. His hermeneutical approach, therefore, entails reading back into scripture what he finds as Spirit-authenticated in modern life. Although this is consistent with the concept of the 'hermeneutic circle', it does make interpretation vulnerable to current context bias.

I concede that our understanding of scripture is influenced by our current cultures and conditions, but I contend strongly that we should interpret life primarily from a christocentric understanding of scripture, rather than interpret the Bible from an understanding of what the Holy Spirit appears to be authenticating in modern life. Anderson's (2001) method appears to start with what he believes the Holy Spirit is enlivening in modern life, and then adopts this as an interpretive key, unless scripture directly contradicts his observations. My approach is rather to attempt to interpret the scriptures from a 'what does Jesus reveal concerning this' perspective, and then, seek to apply this to the current church and to life.

Dane Ortlund (2009:7), in *Christocentrism: an asymmetrical Trinitarianism?*, under the heading 'hermeneutical Christocentrism' writes that 'mature Christian interaction with the Bible necessarily reads and interprets it through a Christological lens in which the incarnate Christ is seen to be the ultimate interpretive key to accessing the full meaning(s) of the biblical text'. I am not sure that he meant exactly what I understand by 'hermeneutical christocentrism', but I concur totally with his statement as it stands.

More important than the thoughts and formulations of scholars, both past and present, is an appreciation of what the Bible reveals concerning the validity of the christocentric principle.

2. Biblical Underpinning

It is obvious from the biblical record itself that Jesus is its unifying theme and central object. For instance, Jesus said to the Pharisees, 'You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life' (John 5:39–40¹). Another example is where Jesus took the two disciples on the road to Emmaus on a Bible root-march and 'beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (Luke 24:27).

The biblical underpinning of my definition of the christocentric principle is simple and straightforward. If the Bible is the inspired and authoritative written Word of God, and it declares that Jesus Christ is the source and sustainer of all things, the locus of revelation, and the

¹ All scriptural quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

primary subject and unifying theme of scripture, then he must surely be its primary interpreter.

I do not intend to make a case here for the inspiration and authority of scripture. This, for me, is a given and therefore an underlying presupposition for this article. However, what the Bible says about Jesus and his role as its hermeneutical key requires analysis.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul describes the Lord Jesus Christ in the following terms:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Col 1:15–20).

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. Colossians 2:9 states this again with the words, 'for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form'. These statements position Christ Jesus not just as *an* expression of divinity, but also as *the* expression of the deity to humanity. If we want to know what God is like, how he thinks, and what his values are, then we need to look to Jesus.

In his interaction with his disciple Philip, Jesus confirmed this contention:

Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.' Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.* How can you say, "Show us the Father"? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? *The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.* Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves' (John 14:8–12).

Jesus claimed to be what Paul later described as 'the image of the invisible God'. He also stated that his words and actions were a true demonstration of the Father's words and actions. This must mean that we should regard what Jesus said and did as genuine and an authoritative revelation of the nature, principles, values, and priorities of the triune Godhead.

In the Colossians passage, Paul also states that 'by him all things were created' and 'in him all things hold together'. The Amplified Bible expresses the second part of this statement as 'in him all things consist (cohere, are held together)'. In his commentary on Colossians, Curtis Vaughan (1978:183) gives a fairly typical scholarly interpretation of verse 17 when he writes 'that all things "hold together" in Christ means that he is both the unifying principle and the personal sustainer of all creation. It springs from him and finds in him its common bond and centre.' This same contention must surely apply to a vital part of God's creation, the Bible.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also addresses the divine centrality of Jesus Christ, but focuses it more sharply on his revelatory role:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days *he has spoken to us by his Son*, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word (Heb 1:1–3).

Karl Barth (1957, vol. IV.3:99) wrote in an appendix to *Church dogmatics* that 'there is only one Prophet who speaks the Word of God as He is Himself this Word, and this One is called and is Jesus ... That Jesus is the one Word of God means first that He is the total and complete declaration of God concerning Himself.' In this statement, Barth contends that Jesus is the 'total and complete declaration of God concerning Himself'. This means that everything that is to be known of the nature and character of the Triune God is to be found in Christ Jesus. I believe this to be true and I understand this to be the teaching of Colossians 1:19, where it states that 'God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him'. However, the scriptures give an incomplete account of all that Jesus is and all that he did. John writes that 'Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written' (21:25). We do, however, have an accurate and sufficient revelation of God in Christ Jesus, and so, we can apply what the gospels reveal of him to interpret and reconcile what other portions of scripture state concerning God's nature and character or reflections of his nature in the accounts of his actions and instructions.

God has spoken to us by his Son. In the past, he spoke through his prophets, but now, he speaks in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. In his commentary on Hebrews, Leon Morris (1978:13) translates the Greek for 'has spoken in the Son' and then comments that

it is noteworthy that in the Greek there is no article or possessive; there is nothing corresponding to the NIV's 'his'. In essence the writer is saying God spoke 'in one who has the quality of being Son.' It is the Son's essential nature that is stressed. This stands in contrast to 'the prophets' in the preceding verse. The consummation of the revelatory process, the definitive revelation, took place when he who was not one of 'the goodly fellowship of the prophets' but the very Son of God came.

This leads to my second contention. Jesus is not only the creator-author of the scriptures; he is also their preeminent interpreter.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stated that he had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfil them (Matt 5:17). He then referenced the sixth Commandment concerning murder and proceeded to interpret it with the words, 'but I tell you ...' He did the same concerning the seventh Commandment concerning adultery. He was effectively claiming to be the one who correctly understood the Law and was, therefore, able to interpret it. Another notable example of this is Jesus giving the correct understanding of the fourth Commandment concerning Sabbath keeping. The Pharisees were criticising him for allowing his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath, and Jesus responded with 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27-28). On the mountain of Transfiguration, the voice of God the Father validated Jesus's authoritative interpretation of the Law and the Prophets when he said, 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' (Mark 9:7). These instances vividly illustrate an aspect of the christocentric principle in action.

In summary, the biblical text affirms Jesus as the fullness of the deity, the source, and sense-maker of all things, the Word of God, the locus of

revelation, the primary subject, and unifying theme of scripture, and its primary interpreter.

An example would help concretise my contention that Jesus is the primary interpreter of scripture.

3. Application Example

An article of this nature allows me to give just one brief example of interpreting a passage of scripture using the christocentric principle. In this example, I seek to illustrate the methodology of applying the christocentric principle within the context of Jesus's own words and actions. It is therefore a recursive example that has the additional benefit of demonstrating the consistency and reliability of Jesus as the interpretive 'plumb-line'.

Matthew 19:16–26 and Luke 18:18–30 tell the story of Jesus's encounter with a rich young man. In these accounts, Jesus appears to come across as somewhat harsh, cold, and judgemental. It seems like he was purposefully setting the young man a challenge guaranteed to prick his religious bubble and send him off condemned. In the light of this, Jesus's conclusion seems to be, 'See then, there is no chance of a rich man entering the kingdom of God.'

I have defined the christocentric principle as, *interpreting scripture primarily from the perspective of what Jesus taught and modelled, and from what he revealed concerning the nature, character, values, principles, and priorities of the Godhead*. In the case in question, we have Jesus's recorded words, yet, his attitude seems to contradict his consistent presentation of God's nature, character, and values.

Jesus dealt very firmly and judiciously with the Scribes and Pharisees who tried to trick and condemn him, but he was gracious and compassionate towards all others. It was not in character for him to be dismissive of a man who obviously wanted to learn from him. Is this whole encounter simply to make the points that keeping the law does not merit salvation and that the supposedly advantaged rich were in fact spiritually even worse off than the poor were? Is Jesus's invitation to follow him just a dramatic device for making his point? This all seems lacking in compassion and genuine concern, not to mention disingenuous.

If we were to apply the christocentric principle to the Matthew and Luke accounts alone, then we would come to the conclusion that we were misunderstanding the Lord's attitude and, therefore, probably missing the point of his teaching. However, Mark also records the story of Jesus and the rich young man (Mark 10:17-27), but he includes something of vital importance that the other two writers omit. In verse 21, he writes, 'Jesus looked at him and loved him.' These seven words change everything! In the light of this, we can read the story again and understand it from a very different perspective.

Jesus wanted the young man to understand that rigorous obedience to the Law could not procure eternal life, so he cited the law, elicited a response, and then showed the man that perfect law keeping was just not possible or eternally effective. He also wanted to make it clear to the young man that the one who stood before him was more than a teacher of the law; he was in fact God, the only one worthy of being called 'good'. Then he, God the Son, made the man the offer of a lifetime—'Come, follow me.' Money, land, title, and law all pale into relative insignificance compared to the privilege and eternal blessing of following Jesus!

Mark makes it clear, but even if we did not have his account we would come to a similar conclusion by prayerfully applying the christocentric principle.

The christocentric principle can be applied to other more complex and controversial passages of scripture, such as the Acts 5 account of the 'killing' of Ananias and Sapphira, where the question to be asked is 'would the God revealed perfectly in Jesus Christ kill two of his sincere followers because they lied to Peter?' This matter requires a more extensive treatment, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

Before concluding, I need to touch briefly on the main objections to a christocentric focus.

4. Objections

Most of the objections raised against a christocentric hermeneutic centre on countering the more common understanding of that term. My definition of the christocentric principle, and those of other similar-minded scholars, was not promoted widely enough or long enough to attract specific criticism. However, two of the usual objections to christocentricism in general could be legitimately levelled at the christocentric principle as I have stated it. A third objection needs to be briefly stated and countered.

4.1. Trinitarian or theocentric hermeneutics

One major criticism of any form of christocentricism is the belief that it devalues the other two divine personages and detracts from the importance of the Trinity. The basic contention is this: because God is triune in nature, we should be interpreting scripture from a Trinitarian perspective.

A key question here is, 'what does the triune God of scripture reveal to us about the locus of revelation?'

John 8:54 records Jesus's declaration that, 'If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me'. Peter later affirmed this when he wrote, 'for he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."' (2 Pet 1:17) So, God the Father points us to his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is even clearer in scripture that God the Holy Spirit points us to Jesus (e.g. John 15:26). John 16:14 refers to the Holy Spirit with the words, 'he will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.' In summarising this idea, Ortlund (2009:6) writes, 'in short, the Spirit himself is Christ-centred'.

God the Father pointed us to Jesus when on the Mount of Transfiguration, he instructed us to listen to him (Mark 9:7) and God the Holy Spirit testified concerning Jesus (1 John 5:6-7). Jesus himself confirmed that he had the approval of both the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Conversely, it is only through Jesus that we have any real knowledge of the triune Godhead, for it is Jesus who said that 'no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matt 11:27).

Padgett (2006:40) argues that there is no incompatibility between christocentric and Trinitarian hermeneutics, and he cites Karl Barth as arguing that 'Jesus is the incarnation of the Word of God, the personal and historical self-revelation of God; and this divine self-revelation

itself requires us to understand God in his revelation as a Trinity'. Padgett writes further that 'once we begin to read the whole Bible together, with Christ as the key or centre of our interpretive understanding, the doctrine of the Triunity of God is not far from sight' (p. 41).

I do not believe that there is any conflict between a conservative evangelical Trinitarian hermeneutic and a christocentric approach to scripture, as the one implies the other and subsumed in the other.

4.2. Canonical hermeneutics

Another objection to christocentrism is based on the contention that the Bible should rather be understood by applying the well-accepted principle of authorial hermeneutics, whereby the inner thoughts of the original authors determine the meaning of any text. Of course, the perceived original intent of a text must influence our understanding, yet we all discount this principle to some extent when we interpret texts in the light of the entire biblical revelation. Padgett (2006:37) writes, 'by putting the whole Bible together and reading it as a unity, we are already going beyond anything that could have been in the mind and intention of any individual author or redactor'. Similarly, by acknowledging that Jesus Christ is the central figure of all of scripture, we are compelled to interpret texts from an essentially Christ-centred perspective. Miller (2010:2) cites Goldsworthy's contention when he writes, 'since Jesus is the climax of scripture's overarching storyline, he must be held as the theological centre which necessarily pervades all scripture'.

In his 'A sketch of the factors determining current hermeneutical debate in cross-cultural contexts', DA Carson (1993) warns of the dangers of having a Canon within a Canon. The christocentric principle does, in a

sense, necessitate a form of Canon within a Canon. Most of the information we have on the life and words of Jesus Christ is located in the gospels; so, from this perspective, the gospels become a Canon within the larger Canon of the whole Bible. However, Acts, the Epistles and even the book of Revelation contain information and insights into the nature and character of the Godhead as revealed in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospels, interpreted and completed by the rest of the New Testament and the Old Testament, forms a background and context for the words and works of Jesus Christ. The record of the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus does not then form a Canon within a Canon of the type against which Carson cautions.

The real dangers of adopting a Canon within a Canon are the implications of man-made schemes of interpretation utilised to determine the meaning of scripture. In this article, I have tried to emphasise that the scriptures themselves support a christocentric hermeneutic, and so, a gospel Canon within a Canon is a divine prerequisite rather than a human contrivance.

I need to mention one further potential objection.

4.3. Dogmatic hermeneutical systems

Most proponents of any dogmatic hermeneutical system would oppose a christocentric hermeneutic by arguing for the superiority of their particular interpretive grid. Five-point Calvinism and Dispensationalism are, in my opinion, two such examples, although there are other systems such as Liberation, Feminist, and Reconstructionist theologies that would also qualify. Whilst these philosophical formulations do not necessarily base their dogmas on any particular books of the Bible, their tightly integrated systematic theologies constitute an effective Canon within a Canon of precisely the type that Carson highlights as

problematic. It is likely that promoters of such systems would see the christocentric principle as a competing hermeneutical system, but that would be a misunderstanding of what I am proposing. My contention is that all scripture and all theological systems should be viewed through the lens of God's character and nature as revealed in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. The christocentric principle is not yet another hermeneutical system, but something that should test, inform, and influence all such systems.

Conclusion

Christianity is, by its very nature, christocentric. The Bible, the written Word of God, is christocentric and is intended to be understood primarily from a christocentric perspective. Because of this, and the other contentions expressed in this article, the life, teaching, and person of the Lord Jesus Christ should be the locus of biblical interpretation and doctrinal formulation and proclamation. In this article, I have argued that, because Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God and the fullness of the Deity in bodily form, all scripture should be interpreted primarily from the perspective of what he taught, modelled, or revealed to us concerning the nature and character of God. I have called this the 'christocentric principle'.

I have qualified my definition of the Christocentric Principle, and my comments on its application, with the word 'primarily'. Interpretation should be primarily, but not exclusively or exhaustively, from a christocentric perspective. I understand and accept that the hermeneutic task must start with a grammatical-historical approach to determining the first-intended meaning of any given text. However, once this has been reasonably determined from context, linguistics, and so on, the interpreter still needs to understand the text within some larger frame of

reference. My conviction is that the christocentric principle provides this larger frame of reference, a more reliable and consistent frame of reference than any dogmatic theological system.

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