

Interview

Dr. Robert Smith

By Art Azurdia



Dr. Robert Smith, Jr. serves as Professor of Christian Preaching at Beeson Divinity School. An ordained Baptist minister, he served as pastor of the New Mission Missionary Baptist Church for twenty years and has preached and taught in over forty schools in the United States, Great Britain, and the Caribbean. Having authored and contributed to numerous works, his most recent publication is Doctrine That Dances: Bringing Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life (B&H Publishing Group), which was selected as the winner of the 2008 Preaching Book of the Year Award by Preaching Magazine. His research interests include the place of passion in preaching, the literary history of African American preaching, Christological preaching, and the theology of preaching. He and his wife, Wanda, are the parents of four adult children. Last summer I spent a couple of hours with Dr. Smith talking about the significance of the centrality of the gospel as it relates to pastoral and academic ministry.

AA: Dr. Smith, do you remember the occasion when you first understood the gospel – where you were, where you heard it, and how you responded to it?

RS: Yes, it was during a catechetical session. My pastor, E.L. Alexander (an old-timer, as we would call him today), insisted on us internalizing – knowing – the Baptist church covenant: “Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and on profession of faith, being baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, we do now, in the presence of God, angels, and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.” I also had to know, as a ten-year-old boy, the twenty-four articles of faith. Not only was I required to be able to recite them, but I was expected to be able to articulate a definitive understanding of each. Though I was unaware of it at the time, God was using Pastor Alexander providentially to help me to understand systematic theology as a ten-year-old junior deacon. I am in debt to him for that.

AA: There seems, today, to be a lot of controversy with regard to the gospel-proper. How would you define the gospel? How would you summarize it for one of your students?

RS: Well, perhaps I could talk about what the gospel is *not*. The gospel is *not* simply good news. It is bad news, as well. It is good news to those who will believe it. It is bad news to those who will reject it. In Romans 1:16, Paul states: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, the good news of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe, to the Jew first of all and also to the Greek.” Now, that’s good news. It’s bad news when Jesus says in John 3:36, “The one that believeth the Son *hath not will* hath eternal life. The one who believeth not the Son, shall not see life because that one does not believe in the only begotten Son of God.” The rejection of Jesus Christ, since He is not *a way*, but *the way* – the only way to salvation – means that persons literally sign their eternal damnation note separating themselves from God forever. It is either good or bad news based upon how we respond to what God has offered. Therefore, I deny any claim toward universalism which alleges that all persons will be saved, regardless. The gospel is the good news concerning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In 1936, C.H. Dodd, talking about apostolic preaching in its earliest tradition articulated that whole idea of what he calls *kerygma*, is: life, death, resurrection, ascension, enthronement, sending out the Holy Spirit, and

repentance. I think that the sermon has to have at least some of those ingredients. Not every sermon, all the time will include those seven areas, but they must at least be in the background informing our preaching to ensure that we are being biblical. We see that Paul takes one whole chapter in 1 Corinthians 15 to talk about the significance of the resurrection – that “if Christ be not risen from the dead,” Christianity is the greatest hoax that has ever been voiced. So the gospel is good news about Jesus Christ in all of these areas that God talks about and it is bad news for a person who rejects it.

Cymbal

AA: Well, as evangelicals we would all agree that the gospel is essential for the inception of the Christian life. But what is the value of the gospel for the ongoing experience of the Christian life?

RS: God is always the one who encounters us, who initiates the process. I must preach justification by the grace of God through faith. He initiates that. That gets me saved. I must not preach sanctification by works once a person gets saved. It's God, by His grace, who justifies. It's God, by His grace, who sanctifies. And it's God, by His grace, who glorifies. It's always God doing it and so I must not allow my works to get involved as a salvific necessity. Works are there but only because they are the result of a heart truly regenerated. I work *from* salvation. I don't work *unto* salvation. The love of Christ compels me to do what I do. So, the indicative preceding the imperative is important. Once a person is saved, there is this desire from within because that individual loves Him and wants to please Him and serve Him. It's Peter, saying in Acts 4:20, “we can't help to speak the things we've seen and heard.” We just can't help it. It's involuntary. We are love slaves; we are bond slaves. There's something in us that moves us to obey – not because we *want* to be saved but because we *are* saved and we love Him.

AA: I've heard you say, on many occasions, that the Bible is a “*Him*” book. How would you talk to a student or to a fellow pastor about the relationship of the gospel to the Bible?

RS: I tell students that the Bible is a *Him* book – it is about *Him* – and we are not to be adherents of bibliolatry. We don't worship the Bible. There is the written word: the Bible. There is the spoken word: the gospel. There is the revealed word: Christ. Karl Barth would say that the highest revelation of God is manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, I think it's possible for us to preach a doctrine, but to separate the doctrine from the person of Christ that it points to, which creates a major deficiency in our preaching. Two examples: Helmut Thielicke, German theologian, was speaking about Mark 4:35-41. He stated that Jesus was in the boat when the storm-tossed sea began to buffet the ship. The boat was not important. What made the boat important was the fact that Jesus was in it. The Scripture represents the boat. The Bible is important because Christ is in it. Luther would say that the swaddling clothes represent the Bible but the swaddling clothes would be nothing without the baby Jesus wrapped within. So I would say to a student, “Let the Bible be penultimate and let Christ be ultimate. The gospel serves to magnify and expose Christ. *The Bible is used to expose Christ.*” Christ is the person we should be preaching about. Unfortunately, we often preach doctrine, precepts, principles, and concepts but people don't see Jesus. They are only given a long list of principles. And you know, you can die with principles. Jesus is not initially after regulations. He's after relationship. When he has a relationship with us, the regulations are no problem (loving, forgiving, and so forth). So I want to preach Jesus, but I can't preach Jesus without showing the Scripture. So, they are inseparable but I think the sequence is important. Never emphasize a Scripture beyond the person of Christ. You preach Christ and the Scripture testifies. The witness of Scripture and the witness of the gospel point to the person of Christ. This triad must always stay together. They are witnesses. They have no other job if they don't point to Christ. They become, if you will, dead letters, a sounding gong, and a tinkling cymbal unless they point to Christ.

AA: Do you see, then, these “moralisms” driving us away from the gospel, thus compromising our preoccupation with the gospel?

RS: In a church, you will often see either extreme legalism or extreme libertinism. With libertinism you see anti-nominianism . . . no law. One might say, “If sin abounds, grace must much more abound and God loves to give us grace, so let's continue doing what we want to do.” Paul deals with such attitudes in the book of Romans. Contrarily, legalism requires works. You'll hear statements such as, “You've got to do this” or “You have to do that.” “Jesus is fine, but you need to be circumcised,” which in essence says, “grace is no longer grace because something must be added to it.” Moralism, I think, has hurt the church.

Even though we say, “Come as you are,” when people are saved, we expect them to go immediately from infancy to full-grown adulthood. And it only deals with externals, rather than allowing people to be conformed to the image of God internally. I believe that moralism and legalism are deadly. They’re deadly because we lift up a standard that we can’t come up to and we tell people to do things that we’re not doing. It’s hypocrisy. I believe in those residing moral laws in the Old Testament – not dietary laws, but moral laws. They can never be kept unless Christ, by the power of the Spirit, enables us to live them out. Then they become a lifestyle because now we have a relationship with a person who has already fulfilled them.

AA: You travel quite a bit Dr. Smith . . . What other things are threatening our preoccupation with the gospel? Are you concerned about the American church’s relationship to the gospel?

RS: Yes, I think that too many churches in America pattern the Athenian congregation. I think you are either an Athenian entity or a Berean entity. Acts 17:11 says that the Bereans heard Paul preach and daily examined the Scriptures to see whether or not what he said was so. They welcomed his message with eagerness, appreciating his preaching and critiquing it. They didn’t trust it just because he said it. They went home, read it, and checked it out so that they could grow and internalize the message. They could say they believed not only because Paul said it, but because they discovered it to be true upon their examination of the Scriptures. Now, that’s what I think the church needs to be . . . biblically saturated. It’s not enough to be in church, hear the word and study the word; but to go home and be a Berean Christian who consumes that word so it becomes part of them; and they will not be carried away by every wind of doctrine. On the other hand, you could also be an Athenian congregation. Acts 17:21 says that the Athenians did nothing all day long but to listen for something that was new . . . fads, novelties, theological innovations, tricks, and gimmicks. I think that’s where too many preachers/churches are. We are more Athenian. You’ve seen it – people trying to make relevant that which can never be irrelevant. By trying to be relevant we relativize the gospel and so I want to push pastors to be Berean pastors and congregations to be Berean churches – not Athenians! Also, I think we tend to be more reactionary. We’re reacting to every crisis and felt needs and what we think people want to hear – what is popular in culture. In the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, “If it’s Christ against culture, the folk don’t want to hear it. It’s not popular and we can’t fill our churches.” Less people means less money, and so we wind up no longer having churches, but Sunday clubs where people come to meet and enjoy and socialize and where no one gets offended. There is no scandalous, cutting, penetrating thrust in the gospel. It is no longer a two-edged sword. It is not an any-edged sword! If there’s an edge to it it’s been blunted. We’re no longer affected. And so I think we need to avoid being reactionary. On the contrary, I think we need to be pre-actionary. Before any action takes place I think we need to be in the *avant-garde*, up-front leading the way since we already know we’re victorious and Christ is Lord. This is His battle – we ought to take it to the gates of hell. Of course, for so long we’ve interpreted that text in Matthew 16:18 as if we are on the defense. But we are on the offence. Gates don’t come up from the ground and come after us. We go to the kingdom. And so I think we need to be pre-actionary, offensive, for the kingdom of God comes through violence. I think we need to stop being so defensive and frightened. It may cost some blood and some loss of life. But God is on God’s side and if we are on God’s side God will answer. The prosperity theology is very crucial and we are catering to what people want. These are the things that threaten the gospel. You see it in Scripture – it’s not just the 21st century. Ray Stedman once said that the New Testament is not twenty centuries old, but one century old repeated twenty times. And that’s so true. We’re on different terms in a different context seeing the same thing.

AA: Please tell me about the theologians and the preachers who have affected your commitment to the gospel, making the gospel so central to your ministry and your preaching. Who has put his mark on you and influenced your convictions?

RS: My pastor E.L. Alexander from Pine Bluff, Arkansas was the first to make a significant impression on me. I was saved under him at the age of seven at Rose Chapel Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. He believed the gospel. He had never heard of “Christ-centered preaching,” but he believed that you were not preaching if you didn’t deal with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in some way. It’s Spurgeon, you know . . . make a bee line to the gospel and that’s it! That was impressed upon me even as a seven-year-old boy. He did not compromise, he was tough, and he believed the gospel, so from an early age I

was informed by him. Next, Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Farms in Americus, Georgia and a Ph. D. in Greek, provided a more formal theological education for me. He was a real prophet. When it was unpopular for blacks and whites to be together, they lived together like a Christian colony at Koinonia Farms. They worked, farmed the land, and sold the vegetables at a reasonable price to people. They lived together as brothers and sisters and didn't believe in hoarding money for themselves. Ku Klux Klan came out there to threaten them, saying that they couldn't live that way because integration had not yet been established. But he didn't back down. And so he's influenced me. He wrote the *Cotton Patch New Testament*. He was simple, and down to earth. The great Clarence Jordan would show up for a revival on a motorcycle. Helmut Thielicke, the great German theologian from Hamburg, has also tremendously influenced my thinking. I've tried to read anything he's ever written. My dissertation was done from his work. I titled it "The Christological Preaching of Helmut Thielicke: The Theocratic Offices of Prophet, Priest and King as a Paradigm for Preaching." I wrote it as a paradigm for preaching Christ. So I took his systematic principle, which, of course, he borrowed from Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Martin Bucer (prophet, priest, and king). Luther borrowed the theocratic offices from the Bible, and I used that as a paradigm and said that for people to know who Jesus is they must see what Jesus does. Jesus is who He is by what He does. It is through the mighty acts of Jesus as prophet, priest, and king; that He is not just a prophet who speaks the word of God, but He is the word of God; He is not just a priest who offers sacrifices, but He is the sacrifice; and He is not just a king limited by territorial turf, but He is the King of kings. He has all power, and one day the kingdoms of this earth will become the kingdom of our God. When I teach courses on doctrinal preaching, we look at Thielicke's systematic theology in which he covers prolegomena, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of the Spirit, ecclesiology, and eschatology. In fact, theology has been so central for me. I really do believe that there has to be a theological undergirding to our preaching. Thielicke has a very interesting way of putting it. He says, "Proclamation precedes theology . . . theology that is not preachable is not really theology." He sees theology as being more than stuff you have compiled in volumes and in stacks away from people. A theologian is not just one who sits up in the ivory tower. Theology is for people. Every person ought to be able to present their faith. They may not know all the jargon, but they must be able to articulate it clearly. In a way, dear brother, Arturo, I don't understand it. I am understanding it more and more. I can't completely and clearly articulate what I think I understand because of the mystery there. And Thielicke would say that there was proclamation before there ever was theology. For Him preaching leads people toward a salvific experience. Once they are saved, they need theology so that they can understand what they have. They'll be able to give an answer for the hope that is within them (1 Peter 3:15). Otherwise, they just have an experience. An experience is no good unless there is a theological foundation of which God approves. I think that is part of what is going on in too many of our churches – static experiences with no theological basis – just experiences! Take, for example, John 9, a passage in which Jesus heals a man who was born blind. Jesus encounters the man and tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam after Jesus had anointed his eyes. The man comes back and he sees. When the Pharisees find out the man has been healed, they interrogate his parents. Of course, his parents don't want to be excommunicated from the synagogue and the man is old enough to speak for himself. The Pharisees ask the man who healed him and he tells them that it was a prophet. They reply by informing the man that Jesus is a sinner. The man says, "Whether or not He's a sinner, I don't know. One thing I do know: I was blind, and now I can see!" This is terrible Christology! This man had the experience but no understanding. They excommunicated him. Then, in verses 37-38, Jesus encounters him again and asks if he believes in the Messiah. The man tells Jesus that he would believe if he knew who the Messiah was. "You have seen Him; in fact, He is the One speaking with you," Jesus said. Then the man believed. Thielicke says we must give people the simple understanding of the gospel in order that they might believe the gospel and experience salvation. Then they need to continue steadfastly in doctrine and prayer. They must be disciplined in order to reach maturation. A major struggle within the church is spiritual infanticide – people who are in the church thirty-five years are still infants and are dying spiritually, never growing.

AA: Dr. Smith, you've been a pastor and you've been an academic. As an academic, what do you want to say to pastors, and, as a pastor, what do you want to say to academics?

RS: As a pastor, I would tell academics to avoid being Ephesian academics. Don't leave your first love; don't leave the Lord. Jesus didn't say to the church in Ephesus, "You *lost* your first love;" rather, he said, "You *left* your first love." I'm afraid that too many academics are going through the mechanics of teaching

– acquainting people with theology, theory, and methodology, but they don't go to church, they don't preach the gospel, and they don't participate in a local spiritual fellowship. It's from the neck up – no heart. They have left the first love of intimacy with God. They show up in a congregation with a heart that's cold. There are seminary professors who don't even open up class sessions with a word of prayer. I think seminary professors need to be pastoral. They need to understand that God has assigned their students to them. As shepherds, they should shepherd the sheep of their classes. They need to know them more than just cranially – know them cardiologically. Students ought to be more than just another name or student identification number. Get to know them, go out to lunch with them, invite them to your home, and go over to their homes. If something happens and they must miss class, insist that they call the seminary professor. Pray for them on the phone – don't let them leave without praying for them. Listen to them. Teach holistically so that you bridge the gap. You've heard it said before – the longest journey in homiletical history is the eighteen inches from the head to the heart. Bridge that gap so that you are not only informing but also inspiring.

“Don't be theologically anemic!” is what I would say to individuals who are pastoring. “Study theology!” Why is it that since you've been out of seminary for ten years you haven't bought a new book? What are you reading? Where are you getting your messages from? The movie theater? Online? In school, we had to read in order to pass with a decent GPA. But what are you going to do when nobody is giving you a syllabus and demanding that you turn in papers and reading reports? There's got to be something from within us that cries, “Our God is a God of excellence! O Lord, our Lord: how excellent your name is in all the earth!” I must give Him excellence. There must be an insatiable appetite to literally devour the word of God and other books so that my preaching is characterized by theological depth – not fluff. I must be planning six months ahead and seeking where God is leading me in terms of my preaching.

AA: It sounds like what you're saying to pastors is, “You need to be more academic” and what you're saying to academics is “You need to be more pastoral.”

RS: Yes, that is exactly what I'm saying!

AA: If you only had one last sermon to preach, what text would you choose?

RS: Well, if I was the prophet Hananiah, and I had a chance to change, I would preach what the Lord told Jeremiah to tell Hananiah in Jeremiah 28:15-17. Hananiah told Jeremiah that the people of God would not be in Babylon for seventy years – that they would only be there two years. God told Jeremiah go tell Hananiah that he was going to die that year and in the 7th month of that year he died. So if I'm Hananiah, I would preach “the grass withers and the flower fades away but the word of God shall stand forever.” I'd talk about the eternal stability of the word of the Lord. I'd talk about the word of God that cannot fade or pass away – that it is eternal, that it is reliable, that we can trust in it. Now, if I was someone like Jeremiah, I would probably preach Lamentations 3:22-24. “Because of the Lord's faithful love we do not perish, for His mercies never end. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness!” That is what I'd preach. We need to just show people God and let God be lavished upon them, overflowing, as the astounding statement in Romans 2:4 says: “God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance” – God's kindness! He's drawn us in with cords of love. I would want to talk about the character of God because I think that's the greatest deterrent to sin. When I see God, I see myself – his love for me.