

Getting the Message

A Plan for Interpreting
and Applying the Bible

Daniel M. Doriani



P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

presented in that text as the remedy for our experience of sin, immaturity, suffering, or brokenness. If the fallen-condition focus is an experiential perspective, the redemptive-historical focus (RHF) is a more theological perspective. The RHF begins by asserting that God has a gracious, sovereign plan to redeem his people. It asks, "What aspect of the divine plan does this passage reveal?" Then it shows how Jesus is presented in that text as the one true Redeemer.

12

Reflecting on the Redemptive Thrust of Scripture

◆ **Principle 1: Every passage in the Bible presents Christ both as the remedy for human fallenness and as the end point of God's plan of salvation.²**

Comparing and Contrasting the FCF and the RHF

Characteristic	Fallen-Condition Focus	Redemptive-Historical Focus
Source of authority	Scripture	Scripture
Theological emphasis	Doctrine of man: the Fall and sin	Doctrine of God: grace and sovereignty
Initial appeal	The experience of human need	The unfolding of the divine plan
Special insight	Every text shows how Christ meets a universal human need.	Every text manifests the need for a redeemer, the work of the Redeemer, or the consequences of redemption.
Final goal	To present Christ from every text	To present Christ from every text

Jesus and the Fallen-Condition Focus (FCF)

The FCF dwells on the person and work of Christ by observing the many ways in which people need him. By "fallen condition" I mean any aspect of human nature that requires God's grace. Even if it is

When I was in seminary, shortly before I preached for the first time in my regular church, the pastor showed me a plaque hung over the corridor that led from his study to the pulpit. It read, "Sir, we want to see Jesus" (John 12:21). Later, when I was a young pastor, one of my elders told me, "I believe we need to hear the gospel message, at least for a few minutes, in every sermon." Recently, in a church of two thousand, just before I climbed the steps to the pulpit, the senior pastor leaned toward me and said, "On an average Sunday, we have two hundred seekers in attendance."

Although they expressed it in very different ways, each leader wanted to see if I shared a vital conviction with them, a conviction I hope you share, too: every truly Christian message draws attention to Jesus Christ, Redeemer and Lord. Conversely, no matter how true, how moral, how informative, how stirring, or how practical a sermon may be, it is sub-Christian if it fails to present Jesus to this fallen world.

This chapter suggests two ways for teachers to focus on Christ: the "fallen-condition focus" and the "redemptive-historical focus."¹ The fallen-condition focus (FCF) is a more experiential path. As you prepare a message, it asks, "What aspect of the fallen condition of mankind does this passage address?" Then it shows how Jesus is

indirect, every passage in the Bible points out some aspect of our fallenness and some aspect of God's remedy.³ The fallen condition in view may be an individual sin or a corporate sin. It includes greed, rebellion, hardness of heart, or any violation of the Ten Commandments. Fallenness also covers the consequences of living in a sin-scarred world, such as living with illness, losing a loved one, or living under the authority of an evil person, whether at home or at work. Our frustrated longings are also part of our fallenness. This includes the quest for a better life, whether by finding a marriage partner or gaining more dignity at work. It includes the quest for higher moral attainment—more self-discipline or a more open heart. It also includes the quest for inner peace or a due self-acceptance.

We can illustrate the FCF by asking why we suffer. We commonly experience our fallenness through suffering, but we can suffer for many reasons.

1. We may suffer as a consequence of our own sin. For instance, drunkards commonly endure hangovers, lose their jobs, and live in poverty.

2. We suffer because we live in a sin-wrecked world. We suffer, for example, when a loved one dies, especially if it seems untimely. Likewise, we suffer when droughts or floods strike, simply because we live in a disordered world. In these cases, most likely, no sin has caused the suffering.

3. We suffer, even when we do not personally sin, if we are connected to evildoers. Citizens suffer from their leaders' foolish wars. Children suffer when their parents gamble away their money.

4. Christians suffer persecution and Satanic oppression. These are both consequences of the Fall, but Christians who are persecuted for righteousness' sake have not sinned. Indeed, they suffer precisely because of their righteousness.

5. We can suffer from ignorance. People press the wrong buttons, choose offensive words, take harmful medications, and much more, all in ignorance, perhaps even with the conviction that their actions are proper.

Looking at the causes of suffering, we see that fallenness is a broader category than sinfulness.

◆ **Principle 2: Every passage of the Bible touches on some aspect of the fallen human condition and presents some part of God's remedy in Christ.**

As Paul says, every Scripture rebukes, teaches, corrects, and trains in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). In studying the fallen condition, we simultaneously find ourselves drawn to Jesus and to the universal need that links the ancient text and the modern readers.

Teachers who think in terms of an FCF concentrate their lessons on the biblical answer to a universal human question. It helps teachers escape the temptation to list all their thoughts on a text, possibly in a chaotic jumble of "ideas that seem important to me." If the FCF directs teachers to genuine issues, it convinces listeners that they need to hear the message. Once they see that a text addresses a common human problem, they will be more prepared for the biblical solution, which comes through the grace of God in Christ.

To grasp how the FCF works, we need to look at something concrete and particular. We can return briefly to Matthew 6:24 and the topic of money (from chap. 8) to become more specific. There Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."

The FCF, shared by both ancients and moderns, is the tendency to treat money as a rival to God. That is, the FCF is more specific than "People have problems with money." Almost every American will admit that his or her attitude toward money gets out of hand at times, whether by worrying, spending, or envying. The specific FCF of this passage is that money really does pose as an alternative god, even for believers, who might think they are above all that.

But Jesus' teaching suggests that the temptation to worship money is usually subtle (see especially the double warning "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed" in Luke 12:15). That is, Money is not the kind of god that demands direct, exclusive worship. You need not bow down to it, and it is willing to make room for other gods. So money does not look so dangerous.

Consider another "What would you do for a million dollars?" question (see chap. 8 for the previous one). This time the pollster asked people if they would spend two years in jail, permanently move to a foreign country, never see their best friend again, or throw their pet off a cliff for a million dollars. Forty-two percent of those polled said they would do at least one of them for a million dollars. Although the poll was more of a joke than a study (especially for those who own parakeets), our very interest in such questions reveals our fascination with money. This is surely part of the fallen con-

