

# Edmund P. Clowney's Triangle of Typology in *Preaching and Biblical Theology*

VERN S. POYTHRESS

**E**dmund Clowney created a triangle diagram to explain the function of types in the Old Testament. The triangle has since become known as “Clowney’s triangle.” It has proved fruitful, and several people have incorporated it into their principles for interpretation and their interpretations of individual types.<sup>1</sup> Let us reflect on its significance.

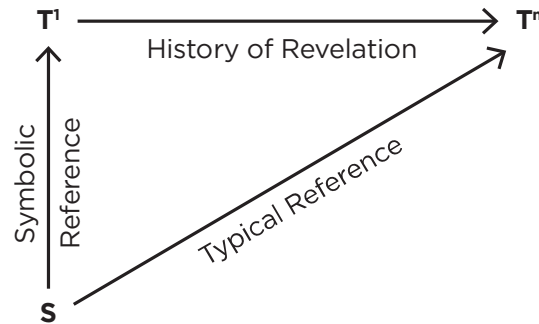
## I. *What Is Clowney’s Triangle?*

The triangle appears in print in Clowney’s book *Preaching and Biblical Theology*.<sup>2</sup> For purposes of reference, it is reproduced in Figure 1.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the course NT 123 at Westminster Theological Seminary, [campus.wts.edu/~vpoythress/nt123/nt123.html](http://campus.wts.edu/~vpoythress/nt123/nt123.html), 1C6aModr.odp, slide 87; Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 247–50; Vern S. Poythress, *The Miracles of Jesus: How the Savior’s Mighty Acts Serve as Signs of Redemption* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 65–67 and elsewhere; Vern S. Poythress, “Christocentric Preaching,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 22.3 (2018): 47–66, esp. 48, <https://frame-poythress.org/christocentric-preaching/>.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 110.

**Figure 1.** Clowney's Triangle of Typology

In the text that accompanies the diagram, Clowney explains what the diagram represents.<sup>3</sup> It summarizes the nature of sound reasoning about types. Since Clowney's own explanation is reasonably clear, we will move on to illustrate how it applies to a particular case, namely the tabernacle of Moses (Exod 25–27; 36–38).

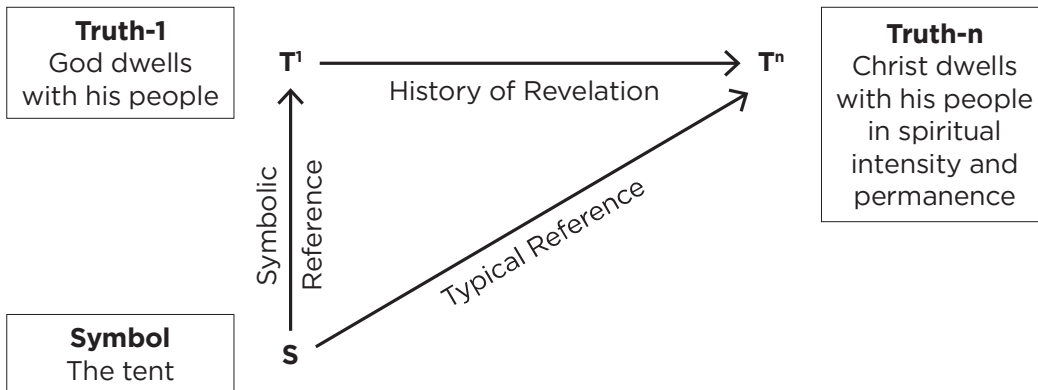
## II. An Example: The Tabernacle

The tabernacle is a physical structure, a tent. In addition, it has symbolic meaning. So it is a symbol, which is designated  $S$  in Clowney's triangle (Fig. 1).

As a first step, Clowney advises us to consider what the meaning of the symbol is within its original historical context. For the tabernacle, we ask about its symbolic meaning at the time when God instructs Moses to set it up. It signifies that God has undertaken to dwell with his people: "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (Exod 25:8). This meaning is designated " $T^1$ " in Figure 1. Step 1 is the movement from the symbol  $S$  to its meaning  $T^1$ . It is represented in Figure 1 by the vertical arrow.

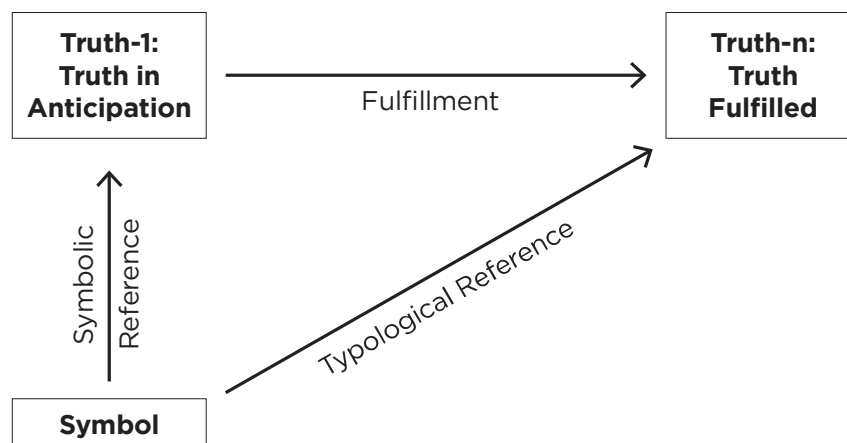
In step 2 we ask how this truth about God dwelling with his people comes to climactic manifestation ( $T^n$ ) as the history of revelation continues to unfold. It comes to a climax in Christ, "For in him the whole fullness of deity *dwells* bodily" (Col 2:8; see John 2:21; 1:14). Therefore, the tabernacle is a type of Christ. Christ is the "antitype" of this type. In general,  $S$  designates the type.  $T^n$  designates the antitype, to which the type points. The relation between the two is "Typical Reference." The completed diagram appears in Figure 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 110–12.

**Figure 2.** The Tabernacle as a Type of Christ

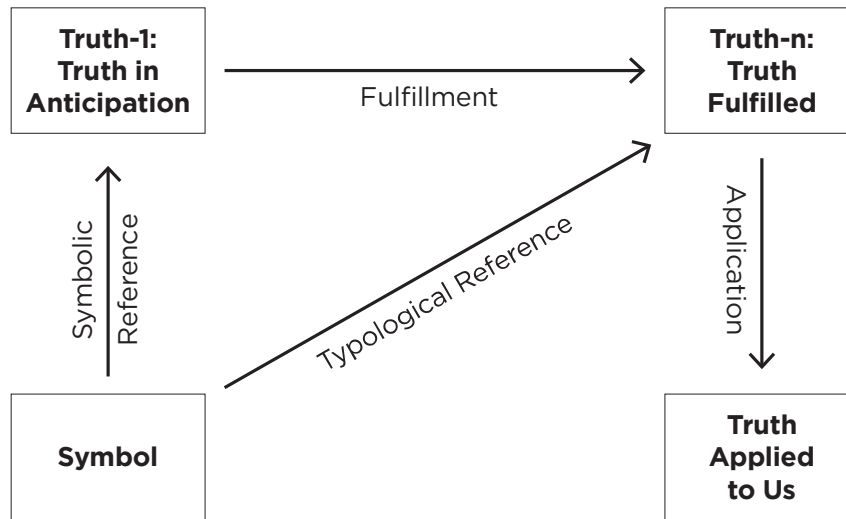
### III. Clarifying the Triangle

We may try to make a few clarifications in the triangle by relabeling. Instead of *S* we may write out "Symbol." Instead of *T<sup>1</sup>* we may write out "Truth-1" or "Truth in Anticipation." Instead of *T<sup>n</sup>* we may write out "Truth-n" or "Truth in Fulfillment."<sup>4</sup> Instead of "History of Revelation" we may write "Fulfillment" to indicate more directly that the history is leading to a fulfillment. Instead of "Typical Reference" we may write "Typological Reference" because the word "Typical" can be misunderstood as having its more common meaning, "exhibiting the essential characteristics of a group," rather than the more specialized meaning, "symbolic" (and forward pointing, see Fig. 3).<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 3.** Clowney's Triangle with Relabeling for Clarification

<sup>4</sup> Clowney says, "The fullness of that truth revealed in Christ" (ibid., 110).

<sup>5</sup> Merriam-Webster online, merriam-webster.com/dictionary/typical/.

**Figure 4.** Clowney's Triangle with Application

At some point, someone decided to add a fourth arrow to Clowney's triangle to include application. So Clowney's triangle became a rectangle (see Fig. 4).

The downward arrow moving from "Truth Fulfilled" to application to us is not actually the reverse of the upward-pointing arrow on the left side ("Symbolic Reference"). It would be more appropriate if the movement to application were represented by an arrow pointing out of the page toward the reader, to whom the truth is intended to apply. But we cannot represent this third dimension easily, so I think we should be content with the two-dimensional representation.

#### **IV. The Value of Clowney's Triangle**

What is the value of Clowney's triangle? It gives us guidance about how to do typological reasoning responsibly. We have to avoid inventing types arbitrarily. We also have to avoid overlooking genuine typological correspondences because we cannot conclusively "prove" them by some artificially high standard of proof.<sup>6</sup>

To show the challenge, we might consider two opposite extremes. On the one side is the stereotype of the untrained reader who invents types by following his fancy. On the other side is the stereotype of the doubting scholar who may find only a very few because he must have "proof."

<sup>6</sup> Clowney, *Preaching*, 111–12.

Let us consider these two dangers and how Clowney's triangle addresses them.

### ***V. The Danger of Arbitrary Typology***

First, consider the danger of fanciful typology. An interpreter can find a type inappropriately if he introduces loose or fanciful connections and then claims that such-and-such a text gives us a type of Christ or the church or some spiritual truth.

I encountered one gentleman who told me that the three gifts of the wise men in Matthew 2:11 stood for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We can feel the arbitrariness of this claim. There are indeed three gifts. And there are three persons in the Trinity. But the connection is merely in the number three, not in the context of Matthew. Such an interpretation pays no attention to how the Gospel of Matthew is telling us about the wise men. Unfortunately, the interpreter who finds an artificial typology is apt to overlook genuine symbolic relations that the text presents. In Matthew we find repeated emphasis on fulfillment. The theme of "the king of the Jews" (Matt 2:2) builds on the Old Testament promise of the Messiah. The star of Bethlehem is connected to Numbers 24:17 and also more broadly to the promise of light that comes with the Messiah (Isa 9:2; 60:1). The gifts from the wise men correspond to the gifts of "gold and frankincense" that the nations will bring according to Isaiah 60:6.

Here is where Clowney's step 1 is important. His step 1 tells us to anchor our reasoning in what God revealed when he originally communicated a particular symbol. The tabernacle had a meaning for the Israelites. God explained it to them through Moses. We look back at this meaning from a later point in history. We can read in the New Testament about the coming of Christ. But the fulfillment in Christ is an enhancement of the meaning already given earlier. It does not cancel the earlier meaning or overlay it with something completely unrelated. Step 1 tells us to honor the truth that has been revealed at an earlier point. The climactic manifestation of truth in Christ will indeed be climactic. In certain aspects it will surpass what could have been seen earlier in history. However, it will surpass the earlier points by fulfilling them, not by negating them.

In sum, one temptation for the untrained but enthusiastic Bible reader is to generate arbitrary meanings and to claim that they are types. Whatever the text stimulates in his mind, however fanciful, becomes for him a

typological meaning. Step 1 serves to rein in his fancies. It disciplines his mind and heart by telling him to pay attention to what God says in the context of earlier texts and earlier history.

## **VI. *The Danger of Minimizing Typology***

Let us now consider the opposite danger, the danger of minimizing or neglecting typological meanings.

This minimization is a danger especially for scholars with a certain mindset. It can be tempting to overreact to fanciful readings by refusing to see any but the most obvious symbolic meanings. Some scholars tell us that we can find types in the Old Testament only when the New Testament *explicitly* tells us that there is a type. Or a scholar may claim that symbolic meanings are only relevant for the immediate historical circumstances. He treats each moment in history as if it were so distinct that the message of God is only for that moment, not for us (contrary to Rom 15:4 and 1 Cor 10:6, 11).<sup>7</sup> He breaks the unity of redemptive history and the unity of the plan of God into fragments, each fragment being its own distinct moment in time.

Clowney's step 2 is essential at this point. It tells us to travel forward in the history of revelation. We need to see that the truth that God reveals at one point in history is not isolated but belongs to his comprehensive plan.

All things in the Old Testament are moving to fulfillment. All the times of history are connected intrinsically, according to the comprehensive plan of God. The meanings are connected through the passage of time to later and fuller meanings. That is one of the reminders that we get from Clowney's step 2. No symbolic meaning we find in the Old Testament stands in isolation. No meaning is just abandoned and dropped along the way to be permanently forgotten. All is moving toward the climax in Christ, which comes with not only his first coming but his second coming (2 Cor 1:20). The interpreter who avoids this richness of meaning out of fear of making a mistake is not doing justice to the unity and profundity and beauty of the plan of God, summed up in Christ (Eph 1:10).<sup>8</sup>

It helps to observe that some connections of meaning are more obvious than others. Some connections are stronger and more salient than others.

---

<sup>7</sup> Clowney also notes the importance of divine authorship: "Such a method [of understanding 'organic connection'] does not commend itself to those who deny or de-emphasize the primary authorship of Scriptures" (ibid., 111).

<sup>8</sup> "But a better grasp of biblical theology will open for us great riches of revelation" (ibid., 112).

We do not need artificially to find a direct allusion from one passage to another, when in fact the texts provide only a broader thematic unity. But that having been said, Clowney's step 2 encourages us to practice a kind of humble boldness in looking for unity in meaning between earlier and later times, between Old Testament and New Testament.

Moreover, a sensitive examination of the Old Testament shows that symbolic meanings are everywhere. All things and all events are what they are according to the plan of God. And the plan of God is deep.

Some symbolic meanings are obvious. The meaning of the tabernacle of Moses, as a symbol of the presence of God and his dwelling with his people, is obvious because God tells Moses explicitly what the meaning is (Exod 25:8). However, meanings are not always that explicit. Consider something a little less explicit. The meaning of the sin offering includes substitutionary death. The death of the animal is symbolic of the need for substitutionary death to atone for sin. But the full implications are not completely spelled out in Leviticus 4.

We can see the symbolic dimension more clearly if we link Leviticus 4 to the reality of what the people were experiencing. Guilt is real. We have to understand that the people in those times, like us, experienced guilt. God teaches that he is holy. The people need forgiveness. And here, in the sin offering, God gives them a symbolic representation of how to get forgiveness. But people know, deep down, that an animal's death is not an adequate equivalent for the guilt of sin and the death it deserves. So they also may sense that the animal sacrifice points beyond itself to something definitive, something that would surpass an animal.

It would be superficial to pass by the account and dismiss it by saying that it is all merely outward ceremonies, or, as some interpreters claim, that it belongs to a "primitive mentality." Such interpreters show their ignorance of the human heart. They skate on the surface of the text. They do not realize that God, speaking in the text, can challenge the heart at a deep level.

And at that level, everything in the Old Testament concerns in one way or another the relation of God to man. We see guilt and pardon, death and life, alienation from God or fellowship with him, curse or blessing. The issues always have symbolic depth, concerning ultimate relationship with God and eternal destiny, ultimate curse or ultimate blessing.

The result is that typology is pervasive in the Old Testament.

## **VII. *The Larger Significance of Clowney's Triangle***

Clowney himself was deferential about the significance of his triangle.<sup>9</sup> The triangle is not a mechanism that automatically generates answers. It cannot substitute, by itself, for discernment and genuine understanding of the meaning of the word of God. Rather, it is a pointer and reminder about the structure of the history of redemption. When it is appreciated in this way and used as a clue to the broader issues of biblical interpretation, it is a most fruitful contribution to biblical understanding, and in particular the understanding of symbolic meanings.

---

<sup>9</sup> “This diagram is of only limited usefulness” (ibid., 110).