Preaching Christ from the Old Testament

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I. Introduction

The topic of Preaching Christ from the Old Testament of great relevance because of the great call of preaching. As pastors, that most of us are (or training/hopeful to be pastors), we have a great sacred duty to preach week after week, and that mandate is in the context of making disciples of Christ.

We hold strongly to the inerrant and authoritative word of God in the Scripture, including the OT. We hold firmly to the exclusivity of salvation and reconciliation through Christ. The question for us is how we mix the two together in preaching.

In this workshop, I want to offer a proposal for your consideration and interaction about how we preach Christ from the Old Testament, blending our belief in the inerrant, inspired nature of all Scripture with our belief in the exclusivity of salvation and reconciliation through Christ.

II. Historical Survey

I commend to you Greidanus’ PCOT which has a fairly lengthy historical survey (pp. 69-176) that begins with Justin Martyr and Irenaus (second century) and proceeds all the way to Spurgeon and Vischer in the 19-20th century. In his history, he covers a lot of ground, regularly interacting and critiquing the views and practices.

III. Components of the Discussion

A. Hermeneutics

What do we do with the text?

B. Exegesis

"A minister's imagination is a poor place to discern what a biblical text means" (Chapell, CCP, p. 302).

C. NT Use of the OT.

Much rides on whether or not you believe that the NT authors need to stick closely to the OT meaning or whether or not NT authors have considerable latitude in how they use the OT. In addition there is the factor of divine/human authorship and whether or not the two must be coextensive. It is important that we wrestle through some of the issues. It is not simple to explain what exactly the NT authors were doing with some of the OT citations they employ.
D. Preaching

Given the call of God to preach, both generally (that the church needs preaching from preachers) and specifically (that God has called us in particular for the work of preaching), we need to think carefully about what that means. Have we preached when we have simply explained the textual meaning (the exegesis)? Is application also a vital part of preaching? If so, can we find legitimate application apart from Christ?

E. Application

If application is a vital part of preaching, and I think it is, then how do we do that particularly in view of the necessity and sufficiency of Christ?

F. “Biblical Theology”

The main idea, or at least the most visible idea of the popular use of biblical theology, is this storyline made up of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Preaching is the attempt to place the text and us in this storyline to show where we fit, and how therefore the text and us in light of the text relate to the bigger story of redemption in Christ.

IV. Biblical Data

As we approach a foundation for preaching Christ from the Old Testament, let us first consider some various passages. These will be few and they will be select. I will just highlight some key ideas by way of bullet point

A. 2 Tim 3:14-17

B. Luke 24:27

Jesus’ point was not that they believed too much, but that they believed too little. They didn’t believe it all. He turns to the necessity of suffering then glory. It was something they should have known based on the OT. And then, comes the key verse, that Jesus “explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (NASB).

Notice two representative explanations of this verse:

“Jesus said that all Scripture is about him. This does not mean that every phrase, punctuation mark, or verse directly reveals Christ but rather that all passages in their context disclose his nature and/or/necessity. Such an understanding compels us to recognize that failure to relate a passage’s explanation to an aspect of Christ’s person or work is to neglect saying the very thing that Jesus said the passage is about. Jesus said the passage is about him. If this is so, then we cannot faithfully expound any text without demonstrating its relation to him” (Bryan Chappell, Christ-Centered Preaching, 2nd ed., p. 279).
"That is the way that the New Testament writers preached: they found Him in all the Scriptures. We must do the same. That is what He, Himself, taught us to do when He 'opened' the Scripture to the disciples on the road to Emmaus and

beginning with Moses, He went through all the prophets and explained to them in all the Scripture the things that concerned Himself (Luke 24:27).

Christ is in 'all the Scriptures,' and you must find Him there. He is there, making all possible by His saving and sanctifying power. Everything must be preached that way" (Adam, Preaching with Purpose, p. 151).

Notice that the correction that Jesus is offering here ties what they already knew and believed (prophet and redeemer) to what they had missed (suffering and glory). When Jesus explains all that the Scripture says about him, he is saying that all that the Scriptures say about the Messiah is about him—Jesus of Nazareth. This answers their error directly. They believed that part of what the OT said about the Messiah was about Jesus; they did not believe that all of it was about Jesus. Jesus is saying that all that is about the Messiah is about him. The reference to “all of Scripture” is a reference to all parts of it (Moses and the prophets). In other words, it isn’t isolated. It is all over, and all that is about the Messiah was about me. He is saying to them that their initial instincts were right.

**C. 1 Peter 1:10-12**

- This verse clearly declares that at least five things were known by the OT prophets: 1) Messiah; 2) sufferings; 3) glory; 4) order of events (sufferings then glory); 5) extension of salvation to the Gentiles.
- What was in dispute was the “person or time” (NASB, ESV) or the “time and circumstances” (NIV). This passage is best understood as meaning that they did not know who it was particularly (of any given birth), or when it would be, but they certainly knew what it was about.

**D. Other Passages**

- 1 Cor 10:1-15, esp. v. 6 and v. 11: "Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. … "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.
- Romans 15:4 — For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.
- Acts 3:11-26 — esp. vv. 22-23  Moses said, 'THE LORD GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN; TO HIM YOU SHALL GIVE HEED to everything He says to you."' And it will

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be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.'

V. Survey of and Interaction with General Approaches

This leads us then to a survey and interaction with some very general categories. These categories are not entirely distinct, but hopefully they give us some broad framework of thinking.

A. The Quasi-Marcionite Model

By “quasi-Marcionite” I mean someone who has, not officially, but effectively removed the Old Testament from, authority, relevance, and meaning to the church because of its literal interpretation. There are some who hold the position that preaching in the church should be limited to the epistles. They limit their appeals to the NT, and use the OT almost exclusively as either an illustration or a springboard to the NT. John Bright describes it this way:

"The preacher who can preach form the Old Testament only by moralizing from it, spiritualizing it, or otherwise drawing Christian inferences from it, has in effect resorted to a disguised sort of allegory. ... The congregation has not been allowed to hear the Old Testament's own word, but something homilectically superimposed. But if the Old Testament can be preached in the church only by disregarding its plain meaning and rushing on to preach some 'more Christian' meaning, what reason is there to preach from it at all? The game has been forfeited to Marcion" (Bright, Authority, p. 95; emphasis mine).

B. The Apostolic Model

This is the position of Dennis Johnson’s *Him We Proclaim*.² He believes that we should preach the OT the way that the apostles preached, showing how the OT is really about Christ. He says that “the major thrust of this book … makes a case for imitating the interpretive and communicative methods employed by the apostles to proclaim Christ to the first-century Greco-Roman world as we minister in the twenty-first century” (Johnson, HWP, p. 3). Tim Keller makes a similar point when he says, “What we have in these New Testament usages of the Old Testament then shows us how the entire early church read the Bible. It gives us warrant and direction to read the Bible in the same way.”³ He admits that the apostles use of the OT may have been due to inspiration, but says “it is just as likely that the early church knew that everything in the Scriptures was about Jesus.”


³Tim Keller, “Preaching the Gospel in a Post-Modern World,” [unpublished class notes, Covenant Theological Seminary, January 2002], p. 22. He admits that the apostles use of the OT may have been due to inspiration, but says “it is just as likely that the early church knew that everything in the Scriptures was about Jesus.”
By way of response:
1. We are not inspired (they may not have been when they were preaching, though they were when reporting on what they preached).
2. Any appeal to apostolic preaching must consider that the data is limited since we have relatively few messages, and no examples of extended pastoral preaching in the context of a local church. Even those who say we should do this, admit that we have no way of knowing what they did exactly. So how do we imitate something that we cannot even identify?
3. Is the apostolic model reliable? It is very reliable. But I am not sure is it imitable.

C. The Typological Model

The basic idea of typology is the idea of pattern and escalation or heightening. R. T. France defines “type” this way: “New Testament typology is thus essentially the tracing of the constant principles of God’s working in history, revealing ‘a recurring rhythm in past history which is taken up more fully and perfectly in the Gospel events’”.

Chapell puts it a little more succinctly: “Typology as it relates to Christ’s person and work is the study of the correspondences between person, events, and institutions that first appear in the Old Testament and preview, prepare, or more fully express New Testament salvation truths” (Chapell, CCP, p. 281).

A key feature agreed upon by virtually all is the types are not mere correspondence, or even correspondence with escalation or heightening. They are rather divinely intended correspondence: “It's not that New Testament writers, trying to explain Jesus, noticed certain similarities to David and exploited them for their own purpose. It's that God created David and sovereignly ordered his life so that he would be a picture and promise of a greater King to come" (Lawrence 2010, p. 30).

It is clear that typology does exist in the NT. Types are identified in numerous places. Zuck has six characteristics of types, the first five of which are common and the last more rare: 1) resemblance, 2) historical reality, 3) prefiguring, 4) heightening, and 5) divine design, NT identification. This last characteristic guards against open-ended creativity in the use of the OT by prescribing a sort of divine parameter on the use of OT events or people as types which prevents the abuse of Scripture.

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I will share just one example, or a series of examples. One of the common ways of typology in preaching is to describe Jesus as “the better X,” which X being whatever the topic is. Here is a transcription of Keller’s audio presentation of it:

- Jesus is the true and better Adam who passed the test in the garden and whose obedience is imputed to us.
- Jesus is the true and better Abel who, though innocently slain, has blood now that cries out, not for our condemnation, but for acquittal.
- Jesus is the true and better Abraham who answered the call of God to leave all the comfortable and familiar and go out into the void not knowing wither he went to create a new people of God.
- Jesus is the true and better Isaac who was not just offered up by his father on the mount but was truly sacrificed for us. And when God said to Abraham, “Now I know you love me because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love from me,” now we can look at God taking his son up the mountain and sacrificing him and say, “Now we know that you love us because you did not withhold your son, your only son, whom you love from us.”
- Jesus is the true and better Jacob who wrestled and took the blow of justice we deserved, so we, like Jacob, only receive the wounds of grace to wake us up and discipline us.
- Jesus is the true and better Joseph who, at the right hand of the king, forgives those who betrayed and sold him and uses his new power to save them.
- Jesus is the true and better Moses who stands in the gap between the people and the Lord and who mediates a new covenant.
- Jesus is the true and better Rock of Moses who, struck with the rod of God’s justice, now gives us water in the desert.
- Jesus is the true and better Job, the truly innocent sufferer, who then intercedes for and saves his stupid friends.
- Jesus is the true and better David whose victory becomes his people’s victory, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it themselves.
- Jesus is the true and better Esther who didn’t just risk leaving an earthly palace but lost the ultimate and heavenly one, who didn’t just risk his life, but gave his life to save his people.
- Jesus is the true and better Jonah who was cast out into the storm so that we could be brought in.
- Jesus is the real Rock of Moses, the real Passover Lamb, innocent, perfect, helpless, slain so the angel of death will pass over us. He’s the true temple, the true prophet, the true priest, the true king, the true sacrifice, the true lamb, the true light, the true bread.
- The Bible’s really not about you – it’s about him.7

Much of what he says is true. However, I am unconvinced that this is a completely valid way to preach because I think it makes the OT story become only a prop in the life of Jesus. This works well if you think Jesus is the center. It doesn’t work so well if you think there is a different unifying center (such as kingdom). In listening to him do it, I think it sounds forced and strange. I think it comes extremely close to allegory or moralism.

We need to use typology very carefully, primarily where Scripture identifies it.

VI. A Proposal for Preaching Christ from the Old Testament

Allow me now to turn to a proposal for PCOT, starting with foundations and then moving to pathways.

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A. Foundations for PCOT

1. The whole Bible is the Word of God to us, though it is progressively revealed.

As we have already talked about, the whole Bible is the Word of God to us and for us. By omitting certain parts as relevant or worthy of our attention is to draw distinctions that God does not seem to draw.

2. There is one plan of God throughout human history, and it is the theme of the Scriptures.

In preaching Christ from the Old Testament, we need to understand that while there are multiple stories, there is only one Story. God has chosen to record for us in writing those things which he wants us to know for understanding his one plan to bring glory to himself among all peoples so that his name is known and worshipped “from the rising of the sun to its setting” (Mal 1:11).

3. There is one plan of redemption in the OT/NT, though it is worked out progressively through the real events of human history.

There is one plan of redemption, though at different times in history, that plan has been worked or administrated in different way. Ryrie has argued that the basis of salvation is always the death of Christ, and the requirement for salvation is always faith, and the object is always God. It is the content of faith that has differed. The OT was not written in a milieu without Christ as a redeemer.

4. We know the end of the story, even if they didn’t, and we cannot preach as if we do not.

Whatever we might say about the unity of Scripture, we cannot deny that we know more than they did. Since we do not live as those without fuller knowledge, we should not preach that way. Preaching the OT as they would have heard it is to act like God never said anything else.

5. The necessity and sufficiency of Christ.

The fourth foundation of PCOT is the necessity and sufficiency of Christ. So how can we preach the brokenness of the OT without also preaching the remedy for that brokenness that we now know fully? Or to ask it differently. If you do not preach Christ, what answer are you giving people for the problem that the text addresses? Are you presenting someone or something other than Christ as the thing necessary?
B. Ways to Christ from the OT

1. Direct Prophecy

- The first way to Jesus is the most obvious: Direct Prophecy.
- The rule of thumb for preaching direct prophecy is to preach it in the context in which it appears, and for the purpose it is invoked.
- Examples: Isa 7:14; Mic 5:2

2. Indirect Reference

- These are passages that clearly point to Christ based on our knowledge of the end of the story (or at least the present stage of the story).
- They might be redemptive-historical, analogy, or thematic, or they may include references to some aspect of Christ that aren’t immediately clear from the OT.

3. Borrowed Language/“This reminds me…”

- These are examples of passages where it appears that the NT author simply borrows language without invoking some authorial intent on the part of the OT author (e.g., Matt 2:15/Hos 11:1; Matt 2:18/Jer 31:15).
- This brings up the meaning of the word, πληρόω, the normal word translated “fulfill” in the NT. It is used in a variety of ways, not always with direct fulfillment in mind. This goes to show that the existence of the word “fulfill” is not an automatic indication of prophecy.
- In these instances, it seems best to see this as an instance of borrowed language. Matthew sees an event, and it calls to mind the language that describes an event in the OT.
- When we preach the OT passages, we preach them as evidences that God has not abandoned his people, even in their sinfulness.
- And we preach that Christ is the answer to that sinfulness.

4. Application

- The two great themes of the text are God and man. The text tells us something about who God is, or something about who man is, and often some of both. Furthermore, whatever it does tell us is placed in the context of the whole Scripture.
- The application, in light of these two great themes, is how do God and man relate? The answer is always connected to Christ.
- Again quoting Chapell: "Christ-centered preaching rightly understood does not seek to discover where Christ is mentioned in every text but to disclose where every text stands in relation to Christ" (p. 279).
- So in preaching the OT, very often we are going to find ourselves pointing to Christ as the solution to the problem that the text raises.
C. Must I Mention Christ in Every OT Sermon?

Goldsworthy responds to this question this way: “Why would you even want to try to preach a Christian sermon without mentioning Jesus?” He says, “If we are not going to proclaim some aspect of the riches of Christ in every sermon, we shouldn’t be in the pulpit” (Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible*, p. 126).

The week to week preaching ministry of the church sets the tone for the homiletical and theological context of preaching. The truth is that our preaching is as much instruction in method as it is in truth. We are teaching people the hermeneutical moves by the way in which we perform them. By our regularly preaching and teaching, we are teaching our hearers how to do the work of studying the Bible. If we present to them answers that do not include the theological context of the whole of Scripture including Jesus, we present to them a faulty methodology. So while you might not mention Jesus explicitly every week, you need to be aware that there might be people there who are first-time guests.

So my answer to this question is a qualified no. We may not necessarily mention Jesus in every message, but we should think carefully about what we are saying. Are we suggesting that man can somehow be rightly related to God or rightly related to the world he lives in without Jesus and his work?

VII. Conclusion

A. We Must Preach the OT.

B. We Must Preach the OT Faithfully.

C. We Must Preach the OT Redemptively.

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