



PREACHING CHRIST FROM THE OT

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Introductory question:

With which of the following statements do you most closely identify?

- Christ is in every *passage*.
- Christ should be in every *sermon*.
- Christ should be in every *service*.
- Christ should be in every *series*.

Some have turned the "Christ in every passage" view into an absolute rule of preaching the OT, at times leading to some questionable hermeneutical and applicational leaps. Yet we do want Christ to be the centre of our preaching ministry. How should we handle this issue?

I prefer what I call a "balanced" view, and that's what I'll be trying to present in this seminar.

Two influential books on the topic:

<i>Preaching Christ from the Old Testament</i>	Sydney Greidanus
<i>Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture</i>	Graeme Goldsworthy

Greidanus:

Greidanus calls his approach "the redemptive-historical christocentric method" (227). He sums up his view this way:

A sermon without Christ is no sermon (Greidanus, 2).

Goldsworthy:

The ultimate concern of the preacher should be to preach the meaning of the text in relation to the goal of all biblical revelation, the person and work of Christ. (Goldsworthy, 195)

Goldsworthy further explains himself:

While there is much in the Bible that is strictly speaking not the gospel, there is nothing in the Bible that can be truly understood apart from the gospel.
(95)

Note:

Both these authors rightly encourage preachers to study a text in its historical context first, and subsequently to place it into the bigger theological picture of redemptive history:

With the historical theme and goal for Israel firmly in mind, we now broaden the scope and seek to understand the message in the contexts of the whole canon and all of redemptive history. (Greidanus, 287)

Three errors Greidanus and Goldsworthy hope to correct:

1. Preaching life change to Christians without emphasising the gospel.
2. Christ-less OT preaching. Preachers who are devoted to authorial intent and who emphasise discontinuity between the OT and the NT, might preach from Jeremiah for ten weeks without mentioning Christ. These authors would argue that this is not Christian preaching.

In preaching any part of Scripture, one must understand its message in the light of [its] center, Jesus Christ. (Greidanus, 227)

3. Allegory. Both Goldsworthy and Greidanus reject allegory as a means for preaching Christ from the OT.

Note:

When you study Greidanus's illustrations, you wonder if he is entirely consistent.

What preaching Christ from the OT *is not*:

- It is not allegorising the text.
- It is not merely working in a magical silver bullet mention of Jesus' name into an OT sermon.

What it *is*:

Preaching Christ is to proclaim some facet of the person, work, or teaching of Jesus of Nazareth so that people may believe him, trust him, love him, and obey him. (Greidanus, 8, emphasis original)

Warning:

Beware of making OT passages into an excuse to preach a NT passage.

Illustration: Spurgeon preaching on evangelism from Samuel's reference to the wheat harvest in 1 Samuel 12 (NT references: John 4, fields white for harvest; Matt 9, the harvest is plentiful, the workers are few).

Any sermon, then, that aims to apply the biblical text to the congregation and does so without making it crystal clear that it is in Christ alone and through Christ alone that the application is realized, is not a Christian sermon.
(Goldsworthy, 124)

Comment:

There is much to agree with there, but let's look a little deeper at some ways these authors might be guilty of overstating their case, leading to unhelpful abuses of their good points about Christ-focused preaching.

Two key arguments:

1. Jesus and the apostles preached the OT in a Christ-centred manner; therefore, so should preachers today (Greidanus, 55-62).
2. Luke 24:27 and 24:44 teach that Christ is in every OT passage (Greidanus) or is the interpretive key to every OT passage (Goldsworthy).

Not just a few isolated messianic prophecies, but the whole Old Testament bears witness to Jesus. (Greidanus, 56)

All texts in the whole Bible bear a discernible relationship to Christ and are primarily intended as a testimony to Christ. (Goldsworthy, 113)

Observation:

This is a *powerful* statement regarding authorial intent.

While the principle of connecting to Christ from the OT is an *excellent* one, some of these conclusions seem to exceed or ignore the NT data. And making these principles absolute can lead to several dangerous practices in preaching.

Evaluation:

1) The example of Jesus and the apostles (Greidanus)

The examples of Jesus and the apostles that Greidanus cites (such as Acts 2 and 13) telling us how to preach the OT are all examples of them preaching from overtly messianic texts with the intention of proving that Jesus was the Messiah. He cites no examples of them preaching Christ as the centre of texts that are not overtly *messianic*.

Comment:

This is an apples and oranges argument.

Sermons from messianic texts specifically intended to prove that Jesus was the Messiah might be a poor basis for erecting an absolute principle regarding how we should preach from OT texts that are not overtly messianic.

Illustrated by Walter Kaiser:

Some evangelical expositors will feel especially reluctant to preach from Proverbs because they cannot find the announcement of the gospel in this book. But that must raise another question: Is the sole reason for preaching to bring the good news of salvation in every message? (Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament, 85)

It might be overworking the evidence to say that the way Jesus and the apostles preached when proving Jesus' messianic claims should dictate how we preach OT texts in general.

2) Luke 24:27, 44 (Greidanus and Goldsworthy)

Greidanus:

Jesus refers to the three main sections of the Old Testament; not just a few prophecies but the whole Old Testament speaks of Jesus Christ (56).

All texts in the whole Bible bear a discernible relationship to Christ and are primarily intended as a testimony to Christ. (Goldsworthy, 113)

These claims are based on Luke 24:27, 44.

Question:

Did Jesus teach Cleopas and his friend every verse in the OT on the road to Emmaus? Clearly the answer must be "no." There wasn't time.

The question rephrased:

What does the word *all* mean in *all the Scriptures* in Luke 24:27?

Practically speaking, these authors are asking us to interpret the word *all* as referring to every single verse or passage in the OT.

But of course Jesus didn't teach every verse in the OT that day. He had time only to direct their attention to selected messianic prophecies from the three main sections of the OT (including at least one from every prophetic book (*all the prophets*, v. 27).

Point:

All the Scriptures in v. 27 is further defined by v. 44: *all three major divisions* of the OT, not every single verse.

Jesus' identification of prophecies about His death and resurrection from the three major divisions of the OT is not proof that *every passage* in the OT must be taught with Christ as its major focus.

Greidanus and Goldsworthy have gone beyond the actual evidence.

Goldsworthy—turning Jesus into a hermeneutical principle:

The key question of interpretation is, "How does this text testify to Christ?" (122, emphasis added)

Goldsworthy seems to turn Jesus into a hermeneutical principle which one uses interpret or reinterpret every text, since the authorial intent of every passage is to testify to Christ (125). However, since this is based on a misinterpretation of Luke 24, the validity of his Christological interpretational method is in doubt.

Observation:

This misunderstanding of Luke 24 can lead to some strained interpretations of OT texts, interpretations that have nothing to do with the intent of the original author.

Example:

Driven by his understanding of Luke 24, Goldsworthy argues that Psalm 1 must be about Jesus: the righteous man of Psalm 1 is a reference to Jesus (203). While Jesus exemplified the devotion to meditating on Scripture in His response to Satan's temptation in

Matthew 4, it seems to go beyond authorial intent to say that Psalm 1 is about Jesus: Luke 24 requires no such interpretation.

Conclusion:

Greidanus and Goldsworthy's misinterpretation of Luke 24:27 and 24:44 causes them to embrace an interpretational methodology of questionable validity.

3) The book of James

These authors' arguments seem compelling as long as you exclude the epistle of James from consideration. The NT epistle of James clearly violates all absolute rules about preaching Christ from the OT.

- In chapter two, James deals with the relationships between justification, faith, and works using Rahab and Abraham as examples, without mentioning Christ.
- James quotes Genesis 15:6 but doesn't tie that passage to Christ as Greidanus claims NT authors always do.

In fact, James mentions Christ by name only twice in his epistle, something Greidanus would condemn as a magical, silver bullet use of Jesus' name if it were done in a sermon.

With that in mind, let's revisit Greidanus's earlier statement:

A sermon without Christ is no sermon. (Greidanus, 2)

A NT book without Christ is no NT book.

Luther might have accepted that second statement, but we should not!

Point:

Greidanus has overstated his case when he says that the NT authors always exemplify a Christ-focused method of interpreting the OT. The epistle of James shows us that at times a Christian preacher can preach on theological and ethical subjects from the OT, without making a connection to Christ his central theme.

Goldsworthy:

To say what we should be or do and not link it with a clear exposition of what God has done about our failure ... [i.e., Christ and the cross] is to reject the grace of God and ... is godless. (119)

Evaluation:

This, however, is exactly what the NT epistle of James does. Instead of developing a clear exposition of the cross, it assumes it. And I'm not ready to call the epistle of James "godless" for doing so.

Summed up:

While connecting to Christ and the cross is a great principle, do not make absolute rules about preaching Christ from the OT that the NT itself violates.

4) Absolute rules about preaching Christ from the OT often lead to theological free association and allegory.

When you study Greidanus's how-to examples, the danger of making an absolute rule about preaching Christ from the OT comes starkly into focus. Making absolute rules almost always leads to dubious extended leaps of logic and out-of-control typology.

Valid examples of connecting to Christ:

- the God-provided substitute for Isaac in Genesis 22 (Greidanus, 305-314)
- Rahab in Joshua 2 and 6, and Rahab included in Matthew 1 as part of Jesus' genealogy (343)

Invalid examples—questionable leaps of logic:

1. Proverbs 8:22-36

Greidanus resorts to theological free association in his suggestion for preaching Proverbs 8. After noting that the theme of the passage is finding life through wisdom, he writes:

Checking a concordance on how Proverbs elsewhere links wisdom and life leads to Proverbs 3:18, 'She [wisdom] is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her.' The tree of life is a reminder of the tree of life in paradise (Gen 2:9) ... Only Christ can again open the door to the tree of life. (Greidanus, 268)

Evaluation:

Greidanus's leaps from Proverbs 8 to Proverbs 3 to Genesis 2 to Christ would win a gold medal in any Olympic long jump competition. On the whole, however, such leaps don't teach your congregation to interpret their Bibles

with faithfulness, integrity, and hermeneutical restraint—let alone help them discover the meaning of Proverbs 8.

2. Invalid examples—out-of-control typology:

When dealing with narrative passages that have no obvious connection to Christ, Greidanus's efforts are suspect.

- Joshua's defeat of the Amalekites in Exodus 17 is a type, among other things, of Jesus' defeat of sin on the cross (331).

Observation:

Greidanus claims to reject allegory, but this kind of dubious typology is as bad as allegory. In fact, out of control typology *is* allegory. It's just one more form of non-verifiable, subjective interpretation.

- An example from Tim Keller:

If I read David and Goliath as basically giving me an example, then the story is really about me. I must summons [sic] up the faith and courage to fight the giants in my life. But if I read David and Goliath as basically showing me salvation through Jesus, then the story is really about him. Until I see that Jesus fought the real giants (sin, law, death) for me, I will never have the courage to be able to fight ordinary giants in life ...
(quoted in Voddie Baucham, *What He Must Be*, 62)

Evaluation:

By spiritualising David's victory into a type of the saving work of Christ, Keller has simply exchanged one allegory for another, but it is still allegory.

A word about types:

A type is a historical OT person, animal, object, event, or institution that was intended by God to pre-figure a greater future reality related to Christ's person and work.

Note: I encourage a conservative approach to types.

The key:

There must be *a God-intended* correspondence between the OT passage and the NT truth, not an *interpreter-imagined* correspondence.

Examples of types:

- the Passover lamb/Christ (John 1:29; 1 Cor 5:7)
- Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac (Heb 11:19)
- Jonah's three-day ride in the whale/three days in the tomb (Matt 12:40)
- Israel's rescue from Egypt/Jesus' family's stay in Egypt and return after Herod's death (Matt 2:15)
- Adam/Christ (Romans 5:14)

There are God-intended types in the Bible. However, there is no such thing as typological method of interpretation. If you are manufacturing types that God hasn't identified, you're committing the sin of allegory, doing what John Calvin called "frivolous games."

The principle applied to Exodus 17:

Greidanus suggests that Joshua's victory over the Amalekites in Exodus 17 is a type of Christ's victory over sin. I find no evidence that there is a God-intended correspondence between those two events.

If you want to teach about Christ's victory over sin with a military flavour to it, go to Colossians 2 where Jesus cancelled out the certificate of debt and disarmed rulers and authorities.

Connect to Christ, but don't use a bad methodology to do so. The end does not justify the means.

Summary:

- 1) It is invalid to argue that how Jesus and the apostles taught *overtly messianic prophecies* must determine how we teach *every* OT passage.
- 2) Misinterpreting the phrase *all the Scriptures* in Luke 24 to mean every single passage of Scripture leads to hermeneutical practices of dubious legitimacy.
- 3) The example of the Epistle of James warns us not to make absolute rules about preaching Christ from the OT that the NT itself violates.
- 4) Absolute principles about preaching Christ from the OT can lead to the dangerous practices of theological free association and allegory.

Three suggestions:

1. Teach Christ from passages where Christ is clearly taught.

Don't use your imagination to find Christ in passages where He might or might not be. Doing that doesn't teach your people to handle the Scripture with hermeneutical integrity.

2. Make connections to Christ from the *main point* of an OT story.

Duane Garret:

*... the movement from the specific concerns of the text to the preaching of the evangelical faith must be legitimate and natural; if the transition is forced, it will be apparent to all and the power of the message will be lost. ("Preaching Wisdom" in *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle*, Klein ed., 113)*

Example:

God's delivery of His people from the attack of the Amalekites in Exodus 17 leads to God's comment in Exodus 19: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, *and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself*" (Ex 19:4, emphasis added).

God's fully demonstrated ability to protect His people from enemies was one of the reasons YHWH urged the Hebrews to commit themselves to the Mosaic covenant, which they did in chapters 19-24.

A sensible, Christ-centred connection or application:

In the conclusion of the sermon, you could connect to Christ as the Good Shepherd who guards, protects, and cares for His people today, just as He and His Father did for Israel in the OT.

This connects to Christ from the main point of the passage, not by means of a dubious link between the defeat of the Amalekites and Christ's victory over sin.

3. Emphasise the gospel, but don't forget to teach the practical, put-off/put-on principles of daily Christian living.

Illustration:

When teaching the book of Proverbs, a preacher might so intently focus on preaching "Christ our wisdom" that he fails to do justice to the practical, life-changing verses that make Proverbs what it is.

Point:

When practical principles blot out the gospel, you have self-righteousness and a self-help Christianity that is no Christianity at all.

However, it is equally true that when a preacher focuses on the gospel to such a degree that the practical put-off/put-on principles of change taught in Scripture are neglected, you get a very theological, but mystical Christianity that doesn't know how to change and grow in Christ. Both extremes should be avoided.

Summarised:

The practical life change of Ephesians 4 requires Ephesians 2. But it is equally true that Ephesians 2 is incomplete without Ephesians 4.

Goldsworthy and Greidanus rightly warn against preaching gospel-less change to Christians. However, it is equally wrong to act as if regularly reviewing the gospel is the *only* biblical antidote to sin in a believer's life.

Conclusion:

1. The great theological lessons of the OT about God's sovereignty, protection, hatred of sin, and so on, are legitimate lessons. Connect to Christ from them. There is no need to make arcane, allegorical leaps to connect to Christ from the OT.
2. If the overall tenor of your preaching ministry is Christ-centred and cross-centred there is no need to contrive fantastic connections to Christ in an OT passage where no connection is obvious.

This is the difference between making an absolute rule about preaching Christ from the OT and a more balanced view, one that keeps you from committing hermeneutical atrocities to connect to Christ in illegitimate, unhelpful ways.

A return to our opening question:

Which of the following statements do you most closely identify with?

- Christ is in every *passage*.
- Christ should be in every *sermon*.
- Christ should be in every *service*.
- Christ should be in every *series*.

Goldsworthy's qualification (regarding to the NT authors)

It needs to be said here that places in the New Testament where the Old Testament is applied to the hearer do not contradict this principle because the connection through

Christ does not have to be indicated in every instance once the principle is established in the wider text. Paul will expound the gospel at the beginning of an epistle and, on that basis, go on to exhort his readers to Christian living without necessarily going over old ground in each instance. (Goldsworthy, 117, emphasis added)

Comment:

Perhaps preachers can be given the leniency to do the same thing.