

*PREACHING CHRIST FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT:
A CONTEMPORARY HERMENEUTICAL METHOD*

A Book Review

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by

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Introduction

At the time of the writing of this book the author was professor emeritus of preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In an interview with Collin Hansen, Greidanus stated,

To describe my approach to preaching Christ from the Old Testament, I can best give you the definition I formulated in (the book under review): Preaching Christ is 'preaching sermons which authentically integrate the message of the text with the climax of God's revelation in the person, work, and/or teaching of Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament' (10).

In the interview the author addresses the deficiencies in "gospel preaching" that his book addresses. Some of those deficiencies are deficiencies in text selection (fragments instead of literary units), deficiencies in exposition (failures due to missing authorial intent and not trusting the text and its relevance for today), deficiencies in preaching the textual theme (explaining and applying "mere elements of the text" instead of looking for the theme of the text and preaching it), deficiencies with regard to moralizing ("character-imitation preaching" instead of focusing "on God's story in and through these human characters"), deficiencies regarding the context of the New Testament (connecting the message of the Old with God's final revelation in the New), and deficiencies in preaching Christ from the Old Testament (many preachers do not see the necessity for this or cannot do more than preach the messianic promises that are fulfilled in Christ).¹

Summary

"The primary aim of this book is to provide seminary students and preachers with a responsible, contemporary method for preaching Christ from the Old Testament. A secondary, but no less important, aim is to challenge Old Testament scholars to broaden their focus and to understand the Old Testament not only in its own historical context but also in the context of the New Testament" (xii). In short, the aim is to provide a method and to challenge preachers to broaden their focus to include the context of the New Testament.

One of the strengths of *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* is its comprehensiveness. We see this indicated in the massive, six-plus page Table of Contents (v-xi). There are chapters dealing with the necessity of preaching Christ from the Old Testament, reasons for the lack of the same, views on the character of the Old Testament, the relationship of the Old to the New Testament, the history of preaching Christ from the Old (allegorical, typological, fourfold interpretations), Christological interpretation (Luther's approach), Theocentric interpretation (Calvin's approach), the seven roads leading from the Old Testament to Christ, a little bit on genres, and ten steps in preparing an Old Testament sermon that leads to Christ. The book also exhibits the strength of being focused on the task set out in the statement of the aim of the book (xii), quoted above.

Critical Evaluation

Greidanus' method is introduced in chapter five and is expanded in chapter six. That method is described by the author as the "Many Roads (that) Lead from the Old Testament to Christ." Those seven roads are: The Way of Redemptive-Historical Progression, The Way of Promise-Fulfillment, The Way of Typology, The Way of Analogy, The Way of Longitudinal

Themes, The Way of New Testament References, and The Way of Contrast (227-277). These seven roads or ways are hands-on tools for the preacher to preach the Old Testament in the context of the New.

These roads form part of what Walter Kaiser calls "the canonical context." Kaiser agrees with Greidanus' concern but adds a warning: "But mind this point well: canonical context must appear only as part of our summation and not as part of our exegesis."² Kaiser further explains that the only correction for past and present abuses that have taken place in the name of interpretation is to carefully restrict the process to comparisons with similar biblical passages that have preceded in time the passage being studied. He goes on to say that comparisons of Old Testament passages with other biblical passages "must be carefully controlled diachronically (i. e., we must ever be aware of the various time periods in the sequence of the progress of revelation)."³ What things were written after our passage under investigation was written? We must include those passages in:

our conclusion or summaries after we have firmly established on exegetical grounds precisely what the passage means. . . . In our summaries we should point out these later developments for the sake of updating and putting everything in its fullest context. However, in no case must that later teaching be used exegetically . . . to unpack the meaning or to enhance the usability of the individual text which is the object of our study.³ (Again,) in our summaries of each main point . . . we may jump over the centuries and bring to bear all that God subsequently revealed on the theological issue being examined. (But) in no case should a later doctrine be used as an exegetical tool to unlock an earlier passage. That would be an extremely serious methodological mistake. . . .⁴

From what immediately precedes we surmise that many preachers and lay people want to preach and teach the Old Testament and want to preach and teach in a way that would most honor the Lord and lead people to Jesus. They appreciate such (rather technical) distinctions as we have just studied, that teach us to use the Scriptures as we have just been taught. On the other hand, there are those who say that, as Scott M. Gibson writes, "the Old Testament is

irrelevant" and we have "no need for the Old Testament because we have Christ."⁵ For those who think this way, the concerns of not using the Scriptures of later periods to interpret Scriptures written in earlier periods are not even on the radar screen. Somewhere they have picked up the idea that they can ignore the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament that comprise two-thirds of the Bible.

Jesus Christ can, and must be preached from the Old Testament. This is clear from the title of the book: *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*. It is clear from several of the chapter titles: "Preaching Christ and Preaching the Old Testament" (chapter one); "The Necessity of Preaching Christ from the Old Testament" (chapter two), etc. It is clear from the author's stated aim, referenced above: "The primary aim of this book is to provide seminary students and preachers with a responsible, contemporary method for preaching Christ from the Old Testament." Indeed, Jesus Christ can, and must be preached from the Old Testament. Graeme Goldsworthy agrees. In his book *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* he entitles chapter nine "Can I Preach a Christian Sermon without Mentioning Jesus?" He responds, "Why would you even want to try to preach a Christian sermon without mentioning Jesus? Is there anywhere else we can look in order to see God?"⁶ Goldsworthy states further:

While the temptation in preaching will be strong to proceed directly from, say, the godly Israelite to the contemporary believer, this method will inevitably produce distortions in the way we understand the text. There is no direct application apart from the mediation of Christ. That is the theological principle that I have wanted to emphasize in this study. While, no doubt, the direct approach will produce nice thoughts and, to a limited extent, even edifying ones, we simply cannot afford to ignore the words of Jesus that the Scriptures testify to him" (John 5:39; Luke 24:27).⁷

The key question of interpretation is, "How does this text testify to Christ?" . . . (Do not) ignore the ultimate purpose of God's word, which is to proclaim Christ to a lost world We return to our original question: "Can I preach this sermon, lead this study, discuss the meaning of the daily Bible reading, without mentioning Jesus?" The simple answer, based on the principles discussed thus far, is a resounding "NO!" No Bible passage yields its

true significance without reference to Jesus Christ in his gospel. That is so basic that I sometimes wonder why we even need to raise the question.⁸

Negatively, this book does not have a lot to say about interpretation as it relates to the genres of Scripture. The author does include a few pages in chapter six that give examples of types, analogies, and contrasts in some of the different genres of Scripture. But one would have to look elsewhere for help in sermon preparation as it relates to a comprehensive study of the genres of Scripture. Also, Greidanus says nothing about prayer in the process of sermon preparation in his "Ten Steps from Old Testament Text to Christocentric Sermon" (chapter seven), nor anywhere else in the book. Amazingly, this is a common deficiency. Most books on preaching say little or nothing about the role and importance of prayer.

Conclusion

I have already taught using the author's "Many Roads (that) Lead from the Old Testament to Christ" (chapters five and six). I have begun to travel those seven roads (The Way of Redemptive-Historical Progression, The Way of Promise-Fulfillment, The Way of Typology, The Way of Analogy, The Way of Longitudinal Themes, The Way of New Testament References, The Way of Contrast) as I have picked from them for use in my sermons since having learned of them. My habit is to systematically review textbooks that I have read in the past, so I will be walking The Way of Sidney Greidanus again soon!

Let us end with Haddon Robinson's words from the back cover of the book: "The Old Testament was the Bible of the early church. Yet many pastors . . . find (it) difficult to preach. Greidanus offers thoughtful readers . . . counsel on preaching Christian sermons from the Old Testament. This is a book well worth reading and applying to our teaching of the Word of God."

¹<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2011/02/17/preaching-christ-from-the-ot-an-interview-with-sidney-greidanus/>. Website accessed on June 22, 2012.

²Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 83. It should be noted regarding Kaiser's statement, namely, "canonical context must appear only as part of our summation and not as part of our exegesis" that it was stated in response to Brevard Childs. Childs "new emphasis," according to Kaiser, "has a serious flaw: the canon has usurped the place of the author in the exegetical procedure." In the context of Greidanus' seven roads for preaching Christ from the Old Testament Kaiser might have emphasized especially that *later* canonical context should not enter into our interpretation but rather into our summation.

³*Ibid.*, 136, 140.

⁴*Ibid.*, 161.

⁵Scott M. Gibson, *Preaching the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 24, 25.

⁶Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 115.

⁷*Ibid.*, 116.

⁸*Ibid.*, 122.