

FROM OLD TESTAMENT TEXT TO SERMON

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From a practical standpoint, the issue of Christ-centered preaching is not about whether it is appropriate or acceptable to relate the content or principles found in OT texts to the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is fundamentally a question of whether every sermon needs to have Christ as the point of the message—regardless of the actual point of the text itself—in order to be true Christian preaching. This article seeks to demonstrate a number of biblically legitimate ways to preach the OT in a NT church context—thereby disproving the tenet that every message must have Christ as its point.

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Introduction

How does one faithfully preach an Old Testament (OT) text in a New Testament (NT) church context? This question dominates this edition of *MSJ*. The simplest answer is, preach it in its context and then relate it to today. While this may seem clear to many, some evangelicals assert that the OT must be preached in a Christ-centered or Christocentric way in the NT church today. That is, Christ must be the point of every message preached from the OT in today's Christian context. Anything short of this is an unfaithful exposition. If this position is biblically correct, then anything less is wrong and needs to change.

In some contexts, it might prove beneficial to address the many and varied interpretations and applications that others have made for the Christ-Centered Preaching model.¹ But, the more profitable approach, in this writer's opinion, is to simply

¹ The best work following the Christ-Centered Preaching model is unquestionably the series done by Sidney Greidanus (e.g., Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). Bryan Chapell, an exceptional writer, thinker, evangelical, and proponent for Christ-centered preaching, describes Greidanus as “the dean of redemptive preaching and its finest scholar” (Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005, 13). Greidanus proves to be a gifted and faithful exegete. His works demonstrate the highest commitment to first finding the meaning of the text in its original context before seeking to bring Christ into the text. He is also characteristically honest in acknowledging

demonstrate from Scripture a number of different legitimate ways that one can preach OT passages in a NT church context. It is hoped this will demonstrate the fallacy that every OT message preached today must have Christ as its point.

The OT Was Written to Lead Us to Christ

Those who propose a Christocentric approach to preaching the OT in a NT church context are not wrong in a great many cases. The fallacy is that Christ must be *the* point of every passage. While it is true that He is not directly the point of every OT passage, He is most definitely the point of many OT texts. When He is, He should be preached as the point of the text today.

Jesus used the OT in many ways during the time of His earthly ministry. A number of these instances reveal that He frequently used it in what might well be equated to an evangelistic use—i.e., pointing people to Jesus as Messiah. Many of these uses demonstrate a model that is acceptable today.

Jesus used the OT to affirm His identity. Scripture records a miracle Jesus performed on the Sabbath that resulted in an intensification of persecution by the religious leaders (John 5:1–17). His response to their challenge, however, was even more controversial. He claimed equality with God the Father (John 5:17–18). In fact, He went so far as to claim to be the One the Father had appointed to render the final verdict over the living and the dead (John 5:19–29).

In order to affirm the veracity of these claims, Jesus brought forth several witnesses. The first was the miracles He performed (John 5:33–36). The many miracles Jesus did were a definitive and lasting testimony to His identity. No one could do the things Jesus did if God were not with Him. The best argument that His enemies could ever level against Him in this regard was that He did them through the power of Satan (Matt 12:22–24). Even then, Jesus demonstrated the irrationality of their argument (Matt 12:25–29). So the miracles Jesus did were a clear and credible witness to the fact that the Father had sent Him.

The second witness He brings forward is the Father's personal testimony (John 5:37–38). There are three specific occasions recorded in the Gospels when the Father spoke audibly affirming Jesus' identity. At His baptism, God affirmed the sinlessness and identity of Jesus as His Son (Matt 3:17). At the transfiguration, God affirmed the authority and identity of Jesus as His Son (Matt 17:5). In the Passion Week, God affirmed the glory of His Son (John 12:28). Jesus recognized the Father's verbal witness for what it was. But few others were there or discerning enough to hear it for what it was. It is very likely that only John the Baptist was witness to the first event. The inner-circle of disciples was the only group present for the second. The third was given in a very public context. Yet, even then, most heard only thunder. Some heard what they believed was an angel's voice. That is why Jesus says that His persecutors have neither heard the Father's voice nor seen Him at any time (John 5:37–38). For this reason, He brings forth one last witness—the OT Scriptures. He points to the

when Christ is not in a text. These aspects make his works useful even for those who do not agree with all his suggestions on how Christ can be brought into the exposition of a text. They also make his work one which could be debated on a point by point basis. But the approach of this current article seems more likely to further the discussion and make the case at this time.

books of Moses as those Scriptures that point to Him. He said, "For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me" (John 5:46). Jesus said that the OT specifically has portions of it that are directly written about Him. That means there are OT passages NT preachers can go to in order to point people directly to Jesus as well.

Jesus also used the OT to respond to His critics. Luke records a series of challenges brought against Jesus in His final days on earth by the scribes, chief priests, and Sadducees (Matt 21–22; Mark 12; Luke 20). He justifies His actions by citing Scripture (Matt 21:13), the actions of others (Matt 21:16), and ultimately the actions of God (Matt 21:42). He responds to the final assault by appealing directly to Scripture (Luke 20:37). When He silences the last of His attackers, He quotes from Psalm 110 in order challenge them. Jesus used the OT to justify His actions, respond to His critics, and confirm His identity. A NT preacher can do the same in pointing to Christ from OT texts when they fit the context.

Jesus even used the OT to illustrate and make His points. Jesus used the wickedness of Sodom as an illustration of just how inexcusable and eternally condemnable Capernaum's lack of repentance was (Matt 11:23–24). He used Jonah as a sign of His own pending death, burial, and resurrection (Matt 12:38–40). He used the men of Nineveh and the Queen of the South as counter illustrations of repentance to the people of that generation (Matt 12:41–42).

Even after the resurrection, Jesus used the OT as the basis for both His earthly ministry and the apostolic ministry that was to follow (Luke 24:25–27, 44–47). When Jesus appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, He started with the Pentateuch and then expanded His exposition into the rest of the OT in order to show that the Christ had to suffer all the things that had taken place that week. While that does not mean that Jesus is the point of every OT passage, it does mean that Christ can be found throughout the OT.² So, Jesus made use of the many passages that do point to Him, His earthly work, and His ministry in exposing the truth about the events pertaining to the Passion Week.

Later that day, Jesus appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem. He then affirmed to them that everything that had happened to Him was a fulfillment of what the OT said would happen. This was based upon His preaching for the whole of the OT—the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 22:44). NT preachers can likewise go back into the OT and find many passages that point to precisely these truths. From those OT passages, it is completely appropriate to preach Christ as the point and fulfillment of those texts.

Jesus went one step further with His disciples. He also said that the OT called for their future ministry as well. He said, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, *and that* repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46–47). So, a NT preacher can find passages in the OT that both reveal the ministry of Christ at the cross, and the mission to the Gentiles that would follow. NT preachers should preach that message when they handle those passages.

² For a full treatment of the exegetical fallacy that Christ is the point of every OT passage, see the previous article in this journal by Abner Chou.

The apostolic and early preaching in the NT is founded upon the OT Scriptures as well. Peter's sermon in Acts 2 is supported by texts Jesus used during His own preaching ministry. Paul's practice is described in Acts 17:1–3:

Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ."³

The three highlighted portions above demonstrate that it was Paul's regular practice to preach Christ from the OT. No doubt, he used many of the same texts that Jesus and His apostles did to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. The epistle to the Romans is possibly a good representation of the types of arguments and proofs these gospel presentations might have included. Regardless, Paul's habit was to use the OT to prove the gospel.

The OT is an inspired witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ. It was written in portions dating back to as many as 1,500 years before the incarnation. As such, it is a marvelously useful basis from which to preach the gospel in a NT church context. It can be used both to evangelize the lost and build up the faith of believers. Passages like Isaiah 53, which was written seven hundred years before the incarnation, demonstrate the sovereignty of God in accomplishing His plan of salvation in a way that goes beyond even NT passages. Jesus and His apostles readily used the OT to point people to Jesus as the Christ. Accordingly, any OT text that has an aspect of the person or work of Christ as its point is an appropriate text to preach Christ from in a NT church. But that is far from the only biblical way to preach from the OT today.

The OT Was Written to Encourage Us in Faith

Paul says the OT was written to teach believers (even in a NT context) how to live for God. In Romans 15:4, he states that, "whatever was written in earlier times [referring to the OT Scriptures] was written for *our* instruction [i.e., NT saints], so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." So, Christ is not the point of every passage. The OT was not just written for OT saints. The proper use of the OT includes an element of instruction in living for God. It was written to give hope to believers in contemporary contexts that comes from reading about God's acts in the past. That is, at least in part, why they were recorded in Scripture in the first place.

Hebrews 11 is frequently referred to as the "Faith Hall of Fame" because it puts together a composite lesson from several lives of faith from the OT as a means to exhort those in a NT age to live a life of faith like theirs. It exhorts NT saints to look

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations will be from the NAU.

forward to a future city whose maker and builder is God, just like their OT counterparts did. There are practical lessons that can be derived from a study of each of the OT saints mentioned in Hebrews 11. For that matter, the entire OT is an inspired record of men and women of faith who believed God, walked with God, gained the approval of God, and were made righteous by God, despite the fact that they fell short of the righteousness of God on their own. For the sake of this discussion, it should be enough to consider some of the many lessons and encouragements that could be derived from a study of Job—even just the first two chapters.

Job is introduced as a godly man of wealth, prosperity, family, and faith (Job 1:1–5). In particular, he is identified as being “blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil” (1:1). At this point, the scene shifts to a day when the angelic host (angels and demons) were required to present themselves before God in heaven (1:6–7). What follows is a conversation between God and Satan that results in the first wave of calamities that comes upon Job. But what is most notable is the fact that it is God who brings up Job to begin with. What is more, He brings him up by identifying him as the most godly and devoted believer on the planet:

The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil” (Job 1:8).

Now, there are manifold points of interest that could be discussed here. But at least three significant lessons can already be derived from this passage that have great relevancy for believers in a NT age. First is the fact that Job was singled out for this trial by God, not by Satan. Second is the fact that Job was specifically chosen by God for this trial. But, it was not because he had done anything wrong. It was because he was doing everything right. Finally, the entirety of this information was inaccessible to Job.

Those three lessons alone can speak volumes to NT believers today. Even the most mature saints tend to view trials as the result of attacks from the outside, consequences of things they have done wrong, or lessons they need to learn. It is not uncommon to hear that even mature believers convey desires like, “I wish I could learn whatever it is God is trying to teach me, so this trial would end.” But one of the lessons that can be taught from this passage is trust. For mature and faithful believers, there may be times when God orchestrates a trial in this life that simply cannot be understood on this side of glory. What is more, it may well be that the current trial is so that God can put real faith on display—not just in this realm, but in the heavenly one. These types of lessons are imminently practical and utterly relevant for today’s saints.

Preaching messages like this from the OT connect NT believers to their heritage of faith, and equip them to live for God today. Every message preached from the OT should not have Christ as its main point, because Christ alone is not the whole counsel of God. A great deal of the OT is useful for practical instruction in living a life of faith—not to mention the many examples given in the OT.

The OT Was Written to Teach Us through Examples

Paul makes it very clear in his letters that there is much for NT believers to learn from the OT by way of example. In 1 Corinthians, for instance, Paul tells the church that there is a great need to exercise self-control in the Christian life. Just as athletes make great personal sacrifices to win a temporal award, so too believers need to live in order to secure eternal rewards (1 Cor 9:24–25). Paul himself—model Christian that he is—disciplines himself constantly so that he will not in the end be disqualified (1 Cor 9:26–27). Then, he turns to the OT in order to give an example of this straight from the books of Moses.

For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:1–5).

Paul begins by pointing out that the Israelites all shared the same experiences of God’s grace and deliverance at the exodus. They saw the same miracles. They experienced the same blessings. They saw the same evidences of God’s provision for them and presence with them. Nevertheless, with most of them, God was not well-pleased. In many respects, this is a monumental understatement since only Joshua and Caleb actually entered the promised land.

But most significant, as it relates to the subject of preaching the OT in a NT church context, is the point Paul makes in the text that follows.

Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, “THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY.” Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty–three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. 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 (1 Cor 10:6–11).

The “these things” Paul mentions are all the recorded incidents of God working with His people. It includes the many miracles as well as the various ways God rebuked, admonished, and even punished the Israelites from the exodus through the wilderness wanderings. Paul makes a point of saying that they “happened” as examples. In other words, God worked the way He did with that generation so that it would be an example for others to learn from. God does not work in obvious and miraculous ways every day or even every few generations. But He did work in deliberate obvious and even miraculous ways in that day specifically to provide an example for believers of all times to learn from.

Equally relevant to this discussion is the fact that Paul walks through four key texts from the OT and shows a lesson to be learned from each. In verse 7, the lesson to be learned is not to be an idolater (from Exodus 32). In verse 8, the lesson is on immorality (from Numbers 25). In verse 9, the lesson is on putting God to the test (from Numbers 21). In verse 10, the lesson is on grumbling (from Numbers 11, 16, 17). In each case, the point is clear. God hates sins like these. He demonstrated it objectively in that generation. That message is intended to ring loud and clear today as well. God judged severely those who committed fornication as well as grumbling and complaining. That is the same God believers worship today.

The reiteration in verse 11 of the point he made in verse 6 gives solid instruction to contemporary preachers on how the OT can be preached today. God acted demonstrably in that day as an example for all time to convey what He thinks about those types of behaviors and attitudes from His people. And, He had it included via inspiration in the pages of Scripture specifically so that it would instruct future generations. The generations Paul points out in particular are NT believers!

So, how can the OT be preached in a NT church context today? It is not just by preaching the excellencies of Christ and His person and work directly. It is also completely appropriate to preach OT passages like those referenced by Paul above in their historical context. Then, drawing implications and applications for a contemporary NT church congregation that help them understand better the character and nature of the God they worship and serve. In fact, one need only look at 1 Corinthians 10:12–13 to see both the doctrinal and practical way Paul applies this message to his own audience.⁴

These kinds of OT texts, preached in context, and then related by way of application and implication to today, are marvelous ways to equip the saints in NT church contexts today. Second Samuel 11 can be used to instruct today's church on what David did and what resulted. It can also be used as an example of how even a man after God's own heart today can set himself up for a major fall. The chapters that follow can be used not only to show how God dealt with David and preserved His nation, but also the temporal consequences of sin that will attend even a choice believer's life after a major moral failure. Many wonder why God let David live after he sinned so heinously. But, a study of the rest of 2 Samuel shows that God would not be mocked—even by David. He let David continue to live and reign in Israel so that he could be a lasting example of reaping the consequences of sin in this life. These implications merely scratch the surface of lessons one can find and share from OT texts in a NT church context.

⁴ It may also be worth mentioning that when Paul starts the discussion by saying he disciplines himself so that he will not be disqualified, his example rings with thoughts of Moses himself. Moses was the humblest man on the planet. He was God's chosen instrument of deliverance for His people. Yet, due to one sin, he too was excluded from entrance into the promised land. These are great messages to preach in a NT church context. If Paul was concerned about being disqualified based upon the lesson he learned from the example of Moses, how much more every believer in every church today?

The OT Was Written to Benefit Us Spiritually

Paul defined the role of pastors and teachers in Ephesians 4:11–12 as those given to the church for the purpose of “equipping the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.” In other words, the preaching and teaching ministry of the church is not just evangelistic. It is equipping. The clear implication that can be drawn from Paul’s description of his own practices in Ephesus is that this work included “not shrinking from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). The point is that Paul did not just preach the gospel. He also equipped the saints for the work of service.

The preaching ministry in the church today needs to equip the saints for ministry. A comparison of God’s expectations of the saints in Ephesians 4:11–16 with the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 is helpful in understanding this. Elders are expected to be able to: (1) know and live the truth; (2) teach the truth; and (3) refute those who contradict the truth (Titus 1:9). The church (including every member) is expected to know and live the truth (Eph 4:11–13) and to recognize error while continuing to function as part of the body (Eph 4:14–16). The responsibilities of the eldership are so much bigger than just getting the gospel right. God expects His church to be fully instructed in sound doctrine so that no errant teaching undermines either the unity of the church, the faith of the saints, or the work of the ministry. That is why preaching the OT in a NT church context is both essential and bigger than just preaching Christ as the point of every text.

Perhaps Paul makes this point best when he defines the two-fold role of Scripture in Timothy’s life and ministry. First, the Scriptures can point people to Jesus Christ and lead them to salvation.

You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 3:14–15).

But, they are also useful in equipping the saints in living for God, discerning the truth, revealing sin, correcting beliefs and practices, and functioning in the body.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16–17).

While this passage is overflowing with significance, a few observations will suffice here. First, “all Scripture” includes all Scripture—OT and NT in their entireties. So, even in a NT church context, the OT is “profitable” or beneficial for the saints to hear and learn from. It is all equally breathed out by God. It is all equally authoritative, inerrant, and inspired. So, it is all worth preaching in a NT church context. Second, its usefulness includes four practical benefits: (1) It is useful for “teaching” or instruction. In other words, it can teach a believer about God, the things of God, the ways of God, how to live for God, and so much more. It is useful to instruct

believers on all doctrines, matters, and practices in the Christian life. (2) It is useful for “reproof” or rebuke. That is to say that it is useful to show a person where, how, and why they are wrong—biblically. It is useful to point out sin. (3) It is useful for ‘correction.’ Correction means to set something right either in the sense of restoring something that is broken or out of alignment, or improving something. Scripture can be used in a preaching ministry from either testament to do just that. (4) It is useful for “training.” Training or discipline here basically speaks of teaching how to put it all into practice. It is the ongoing regimen of discipline that results in a life lived for God. So, since this is what the Scriptures are profitable for, does it not then necessarily follow that this is how they should be preached in the church today?

Conclusion

It is hoped that this short essay has helped make the case for preaching the OT in a NT church context. There are so many valuable lessons that can be learned from a study of the whole counsel of God. Many of these lessons and truths are very much about the person and work of Jesus Christ. But every OT text does not have Christ as its point. That is the primary objection to the Christ-Centered Preaching model championed today. Even beyond those discussed above, the following represent some of the many and varied additional topics and purposes of the OT relevant for the NT church:

- Prophetic announcements which convey eschatological teaching (not limited to Christ)—especially those regarding Israel’s future
- Practical wisdom—especially from Proverbs and Ecclesiastes
- Identification of God’s character and actions—regarding both the Father’s and the Spirit’s works and character—not just Christ
- Identification of sin—especially from the Law of Moses, but throughout the OT
- Warning of error
- Confirmation of the historical accuracy of the OT (e.g., regarding creation and the Flood, etc.)

In the end, there are three real dangers to following the Christ-Centered model of preaching the OT today and preaching Christ as the point of every OT text. First, it models bad hermeneutics. It not only practices it, it models it. The saints who sit under a ministry like this will begin to follow those same practices. They will look to find Christ in every OT passage and fail to learn sound hermeneutical principles of letting the text speak for itself.

Second, it rejects the biblical model. In Luke 24, Jesus did walk through key texts in the OT to prove His death, burial, and resurrection. But that does not mean He was suggesting every text was about Him. Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:2, preach the Word. He does not say, preach Christ. He says, preach the Word. As shown above, Scripture is useful for more than just pointing to the person and work of Christ. It is useful for everything from evangelism to practical Christian living (2 Tim 3:14–17).

Finally, it fails to fully equip the saints. In Ephesians 4, Paul clearly lays out the role of pastors and teachers. It is not just to evangelize the lost. It is to equip the saints for the work and build them up into a unity of faith and knowledge. This knowledge certainly includes a great deal of instruction on the person and work of Christ. But it extends to the whole counsel of God as well.⁵

How does one preach an OT text in a NT church context? Preach it in its biblical context and then relate it to the church today. If it points to Christ, make Christ the point of the message. If Christ is not the point of the text, then do not force it. There are many ways that NT believers can benefit from a faithful exposition from an OT text.

⁵ While it is beyond the scope of this article, it is also worth pointing out that a NT church service typically consists of more than just a sermon. That means that elements like a gospel presentation or invitation can be incorporated faithfully into the service in more ways than just the preaching event. Additionally, while there are likely always going to be unbelievers present in a NT church service, the purpose of the regular weekly assembly should be primarily geared to instructing believers in living for God, and facilitating believers in worshiping God corporately. Most services should not be primarily geared to addressing unbelievers about God. Christ should be exalted every service. But, the main focus should be on the saints of the church, not the visitors in the church on most Sundays.