

# PREACHING CHRIST FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT\*

*Sidney Greidanus*

**E**ARLY IN MY MINISTRY I preached a series of sermons on the Book of Ecclesiastes. After one of these sermons a retired preacher said to me, “I appreciated your sermon, Sid, but I wonder, could a rabbi have preached your sermon in a synagogue?” The image of a rabbi preaching my sermon in a synagogue etched itself indelibly in my brain. It was a loaded question, of course, but the concern my friend expressed was valid. That concern was whether my sermon was distinctively Christian, whether I had preached Christ. I know that I had failed on that score, and frankly I did not know how to do it any better. Eventually his question set me off on a quest that resulted in my writing the book *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*.<sup>1</sup>

In that book I argue for the necessity of preaching Jesus Christ in every sermon, and I offer a hermeneutical method for doing so. I am now working on a more practical book that applies this Christocentric method to the Genesis narratives, and this is the topic of these lectures. The first lecture in this series briefly explains the redemptive-historical Christocentric method of interpretation, and the others consist of expository essays that demonstrate how this method works in preaching the first three narratives of the Book of Genesis.

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Sidney Greidanus is Professor of Preaching, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

\* This is the first article in a four-part series “Preaching Christ from the Genesis Narratives,” delivered by the author as the W. H. Griffith Thomas Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, February 18–21, 2003.

<sup>1</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

### THE NECESSITY OF PREACHING CHRIST

The first reason for preaching Christ is that Jesus mandated His disciples to do so. “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20).<sup>2</sup> We cannot make disciples of Jesus without telling people about Him. In fact Jesus said to teach them “to obey everything” He commanded them.

A second reason for preaching Christ is that Jesus is the way of salvation. Jesus said to Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Faith in Jesus is the way of salvation. In fact Jesus claimed that He is the *only* way of salvation, the *only* way to having eternal life. He said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). In His high priestly prayer Jesus said, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (17:3).

Later the apostle Peter confirmed before the Sanhedrin, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The apostle Paul echoed this conviction when he wrote, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of [or, about] Christ” (Rom. 10:17). And Paul testified to the church in Corinth, “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23). And again, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2).

A third reason for preaching Christ in every sermon is that in a post-Christian culture the message of Jesus Christ should be made explicit. In the past, in our *Christian* culture, preachers could perhaps assume that many or most of their hearers would instinctively make connections between the message of the sermon and Jesus Christ. But one cannot make such assumptions in a post-Christian culture. Preachers will have to make explicit the connections between the biblical message and Jesus Christ.

A distinguishing mark of this post-Christian culture is that everything is said to be relative. If people think about God at all, they think that there are many ways to God. Searching for Him is like climbing a mountain: Christians follow one path up the mountain, Jews another path, and Muslims still another. Eventually all

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<sup>2</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

end up on the same mountaintop. But if the Bible is right, there is *only one way* to God, and that is through Jesus Christ. Many people will perish if they do not hear about Jesus Christ. So it becomes crucial that Jesus Christ be preached explicitly in every sermon.

### THE MEANING OF "PREACHING CHRIST"

The history of preaching shows that "preaching Christ" has meant different things to different people.

#### "PREACHING CHRIST" IS MORE SPECIFIC THAN "PREACHING GOD"

Because of the danger of twisting the Scriptures in order to preach Christ, some have argued (and I was among them) that preaching Christ from the Old Testament can be as broad as preaching God. After all, Christ is God. Others have claimed that preaching Christ from the Old Testament can be the same as preaching the eternal Logos (the Word), who "in the beginning . . . was with God, and . . . was God" (John 1:1).

But these senses of preaching Christ are too broad. As seen in the New Testament, preaching Christ is to preach not God in general, but the Word made flesh, that is, Christ incarnate. According to the New Testament, "preaching Christ" is preaching Jesus of Nazareth as the climax of God's revelation of Himself. As John explained, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (v. 18).

#### "PREACHING CHRIST" IS MORE THAN "PREACHING CHRIST CRUCIFIED"

If understanding preaching Christ as preaching God is too broad, others have made their definition of "preaching Christ" too narrow. They say it means preaching Christ crucified. But the requirement of preaching the cross of Christ from every text in the Old Testament is a hermeneutical straitjacket that is bound to lead to twisting the Scriptures. Starting with an Old Testament passage, many preachers somehow land miraculously at Calvary. How did they get there? Often by way of the ancient and much discredited allegorical method.

Those who follow the allegorical method of interpretation search for the "real" meaning of the text below the literal, historical meaning. They read biblical historical narratives as allegories, as extended metaphors, but frequently just one word will do—one word understood as a metaphor. For example they come across the word "wood" or "tree" in the Old Testament and they immediately assume they have a link to the cross of Christ. The ark that saved Noah and his family stands for the wood of the cross, which saves

us. The wood Isaac carried up the mountain for a burnt offering speaks of Christ carrying His cross. The wood Moses cast into the bitter waters of Marah to make them sweet refers to the wood of Jesus' cross which makes our bitter experiences sweet.<sup>3</sup>

Allegorical interpretation fails to transmit the message of the inspired writer, and instead it reads New Testament ideas back into the Old Testament text. In essence it has abandoned the message of Old Testament historical texts and preaches only the New Testament message. In order to do justice to the Old Testament in our preaching, we need a broader definition of "preaching Christ" than "preaching Christ crucified."

**"PREACHING CHRIST" IS MORE THAN PREACHING THE PERSON  
AND WORK OF CHRIST**

The most common understanding today of preaching Christ is "preaching the person and work of Christ." This is a broader understanding than "preaching Christ crucified" and a welcome liberation from the hermeneutical straitjacket of preaching the Cross from every passage in the Old Testament. And this definition can easily be confirmed by the New Testament. Although Paul claims, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), Paul is not thinking of the Baby Jesus who grew up into an adult and was crucified. Rather, Paul is thinking of the risen, exalted Lord who met him on the road to Damascus and from there his thought goes *back* in time: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except [this living] Jesus Christ and him crucified."<sup>4</sup> Later in this same letter Paul states explicitly that preaching Christ is much more than preaching the Cross. He writes about the good news he preached to the Corinthians, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (15:3–4). Moreover Paul testifies that he preached "Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor. 4:5). When we think of preaching Christ, therefore, we must think not only of preaching Jesus' crucifixion but also His resurrection, His ascension, His present rule at the right hand of the Father, and His coming again to establish God's kingdom in perfection.

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<sup>3</sup> For more examples of allegorical interpretation see Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 70–90.

<sup>4</sup> See John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 109.

But even this definition of preaching the person and/or work of Jesus Christ is hermeneutically too confining for preaching every Old Testament passage with integrity. For example in preaching Old Testament wisdom literature most texts cannot be linked legitimately to the person or work of Christ. We need a broader definition of “preaching Christ,” a definition that encompasses also the *teaching* of Jesus.

**“PREACHING CHRIST” IS PREACHING THE PERSON, WORK, AND/OR TEACHING OF CHRIST**

In His missionary mandate Jesus Himself commanded us to spread His teachings: “Make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20). Elsewhere Jesus emphasized the crucial importance of His teaching. He said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32). In his second letter John reiterated the decisive significance of Jesus’ teaching: “Anyone who . . . does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching [of Christ] has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9). Therefore preaching Christ includes not only the person and work of Christ, but also His teaching—His teaching on such topics as God, the kingdom of God, Jesus Himself and His mission, salvation, God’s law, and believers’ responsibilities and mission. This opens up a whole new range of links from the Old Testament to Christ in the New Testament. Hence I propose the following definition of preaching Christ: “Preaching Christ from the Old Testament is to preach sermons that 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.”<sup>5</sup>

**PREACHING CHRIST FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT WITH INTEGRITY**

The crucial hermeneutical question may still be raised, But can we preach Jesus Christ from the Old Testament with integrity? Can we preach Christ incarnate from a book that was written centuries before He was born? The answer is yes, for two reasons.

The first reason is that the Old Testament speaks of Jesus Christ. In fact Jesus Himself claimed that the Old Testament speaks of Him. In His first sermon in His hometown of Nazareth,

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<sup>5</sup> Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 10.

Jesus read the scroll from Isaiah 61 and proclaimed, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). In Isaiah the Lord promised that the Lord’s anointed would bring in “the year of the Lord’s favor” (Isa. 61:2), the year of Jubilee, and Jesus proclaimed that He was the fulfillment of this promise.

More broadly, Jesus exclaimed to the Jews, “You diligently study the Scriptures [the Old Testament] because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify *about me*” (John 5:39, italics added). After His resurrection Jesus chided two of His disciples, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures *concerning himself*” (Luke 24:25–27, italics added). Later Jesus met the Eleven and their companions and stated even more pointedly, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written *about me* in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (v. 44, italics added). Clearly, then, Jesus saw His life and work as a fulfillment of Old Testament promises and predictions.

Jesus’ disciples followed in His footsteps. On the Day of Pentecost Peter preached Christ with references to the prophet Joel and to Psalms 16 and 110. In Acts 7 Stephen traced Old Testament redemptive history to Jesus Christ. When Philip met the Ethiopian eunuch, who was puzzled about the meaning of Isaiah 53, “Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35). And the apostle Paul encouraged his young friend Timothy, “Continue in what you have learned . . . because from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures [the Old Testament], which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:14–15).

Since the New Testament implies that the Old Testament bears witness to Jesus Christ, we can preach Jesus from the Old Testament with hermeneutical integrity. Moreover, if the Old Testament bears witness to Jesus Christ, hermeneutical integrity *requires* that we do justice to this Christocentric dimension in preaching from the Old Testament.

A second reason why we can preach Christ from the Old Testament with integrity is that the context of the Old Testament is the New Testament. A basic rule of interpretation is that a text must always be understood in its context. Since the New Testament is the context of the Old Testament, the Old Testament is to be understood in the framework of the New Testament. And since Jesus Christ is the heart of the New Testament, the Old Testament

is to be understood and preached in the context of the person, work, and/or teaching of Jesus Christ. For example when one preaches on Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me" (v. 1), one cannot stop at the promise but must necessarily move on to its New Testament fulfillment in Jesus (Luke 4). And when one preaches on the great king David, one cannot stop at the type but must necessarily move on to its New Testament antitype, the great son of David, Jesus Christ. And when one preaches on God's act of redemption at the Exodus from Egypt, one cannot stop at this Old Testament redemptive act but must move on to God's ultimate redemptive act in Jesus. Every text must be understood and preached in its broader redemptive-historical and canonical contexts.

### BASIC MOVES IN PREACHING CHRIST FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

Understanding a text in the contexts of the biblical canon and of redemptive history is the foundation of my proposed Christocentric method. It begins with two basic moves. We must first determine the text's message for Israel. This is of vital importance in order to do justice to the Scriptures. This is the foundation of sound interpretation.

Only after we have established the text's meaning for Israel can we then seek to understand this message in the context of the whole biblical canon and redemptive history. As part of this second move we must explore the ways in which this Old Testament message links up with the person, work, and/or teaching of Jesus. We must consciously look for a way, a road, from the message of this Old Testament text to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Charles Spurgeon instructed a young preacher, "Don't you know, young man, that from every town and every village and every hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London? So from every text of Scripture there is a road to Christ. And my dear brother, your business is, when you get to a text, to say, now, what is the road to Christ? I have never found a text that had not got a road to Christ in it, and if ever I do find one, I will go over hedge and ditch but I would get at my Master, for the sermon cannot do any good unless there is a savor of Christ in it."<sup>6</sup>

There are basically seven legitimate roads to Christ. Some Old Testament passages have only one legitimate road to Him, while

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<sup>6</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Christ Precious to Believers," quoted by David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 168.

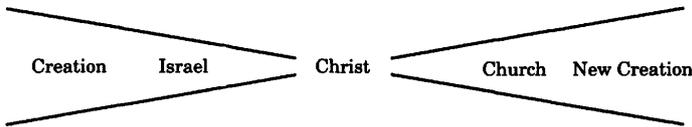
others offer all seven possibilities. Of course, if in the sermon one seeks to travel too many roads to Christ, the congregation will be confused and the sermon will stall. Less can be more, also in preaching Christ from the Old Testament. Preachers should therefore select for the sermon two or three roads to Christ that are in line with the theme of the sermon.

### SEVEN LEGITIMATE WAYS OF PREACHING CHRIST FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

Now let me briefly explain each of the seven ways of preaching Christ from the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE WAY OF REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL PROGRESSION

The Bible sketches how God's history with the world progresses from His good creation (Gen. 1), to the human fall into sin, to God's plan of redemption through the Seed of the woman (3:15), to Christ (the Gospels), to the new Creation (Rev. 22). In other words the Bible sketches a continuous redemptive history with Christ at its center. In broad strokes this redemptive history can be depicted as follows.<sup>8</sup>



As redemptive history moves forward, so does the history of revelation recorded in the Scriptures. The coming of Christ, especially, is a giant leap forward both in redemptive history and the history of revelation. This progression in redemptive history always entails continuity as well as discontinuity. It is sometimes difficult to strike the right balance between continuity and discontinuity. Some preachers err on the side of seeing only continuity; others err on the side of seeing only discontinuity. But as redemptive history progresses, it always shows both continuity and discontinuity. For example progression in redemptive history leads from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34); it leads

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<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed explanation see Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 203–77.

<sup>8</sup> See Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. Floyd V. Filson, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 178.

from God's promises to later fulfillments, from the lesser types in the Old Testament to the greater Antitype in the New Testament; it leads from God's dealings with Israel to His dealings in Christ with the church.

In preaching an Old Testament historical narrative, therefore, we need to pay attention to the progression in redemptive history from this Old Testament event to the climax of God's redemptive acts in Jesus' first and second comings. We learn to see the Old Testament narratives not merely as biographies of interesting characters but as parts of the national history of Israel, which in turn is part of the history of the coming kingdom of God and its King, Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE WAY OF PROMISE-FULFILLMENT

God's promises in the Old Testament gradually fill up until they reach their final fulfillment in Jesus Christ. New Testament authors frequently emphasize that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament promises. For example Matthew writes twelve times about Jesus "fulfilling" Old Testament promises: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet" (Matt. 1:22). Not only is Jesus' birth seen as a fulfillment of Old Testament promises, but also His preaching and miracles, His suffering and death, His resurrection and ascension, and His outpouring of the Spirit fulfill promises given in the Old Testament.

#### THE WAY OF TYPOLOGY

God's provision of redemption in Christ was foreshadowed in Old Testament events, persons, and institutions that prefigured the person or work of Jesus Christ at His first and/or second comings. A type (*τύπος*) is a mold or a form for a product, and the antitype (*ἀντίτυπος*) is the reality. For example John the Baptist introduced Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). The lambs used in Old Testament sin offerings prefigured Jesus, the Lamb of God. Jesus Himself used typology when He said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (3:14-15). The bronze serpent lifted up in the wilderness as a sign of God's salvation for believers foreshadowed Jesus being lifted up for the salvation of all who believe in Him. Paul called Adam "a pattern [*τύπος*] of the one to come," that

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 75.

is, Jesus (Rom. 5:14). The letter to the Hebrews, especially, is filled with typology: Aaron, Moses, Joshua, Melchizedek, and other Old Testament figures as well as sacrifices are types of Jesus Christ.

#### THE WAY OF ANALOGY

Whereas the way of typology finds analogy and escalation between type and antitype, the way of analogy is more general. Analogy exposes parallels between what God taught Israel and what Christ teaches the church; what God promised Israel and what Christ promises us; what God demanded of Israel (the Law) and what Christ demands of us. For example, when we preach on Psalm 23, “The LORD is my shepherd” (v. 1), we can confidently proclaim that through Christ’s work this same Lord is the believer’s shepherd today.

#### THE WAY OF LONGITUDINAL THEMES

“Longitudinal themes” is a technical term in the discipline of biblical theology. It refers to themes that can be traced through the Scriptures from the Old Testament to the New. We can utilize this concept of longitudinal themes for preaching Christ, for every major Old Testament theme leads to Christ. For example the theme of God’s law can be traced from the creation accounts, through the patriarchs, to Sinai, the prophets, to Christ, who not only lived God’s Law perfectly and thus fulfilled the Law for us, but also showed its depth and taught us how to live as His disciples, who keep His commandments. Many other themes, similarly, can be traced through the Old Testament to Christ in the New Testament—themes such as God’s coming kingdom, God’s covenant, God’s redemption, God’s presence, God’s love, God’s faithfulness, God’s grace, God’s judgment, God’s people.

#### THE WAY OF NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES

New Testament verses that quote or allude to the Old Testament preaching text can serve as bridges to preaching Christ. The appendix of a Greek New Testament lists many of these quotations. A good cross-reference Bible or a concordance is also helpful. Computer software such as Logos/Libronix will enable searches by words as well as searches among the 500,000 cross references listed in *The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*.

Because of the stature of the New Testament, I first placed the way of New Testament references at the top of this list of ways to preach Christ. But this can sometimes get us on the wrong track, for the New Testament writers did not always seek to *interpret* Old Testament passages but simply used them to illustrate the point

they wished to make (see, for example, Paul's allegory in Galatians 4). It is best, therefore, to do our own work first with the above five ways and then investigate whether the New Testament supports any of these ways to Christ. Frequently we can build a solid bridge to Christ by combining the way we discerned, for example, promise-fulfillment, with a New Testament reference.

#### THE WAY OF CONTRAST

Because of the progression in the histories of redemption and revelation, the message of the Old Testament text may sometimes stand in contrast to the message of the New Testament. For example the Old Testament demanded animal sacrifices to atone for sin, but the New Testament drops this demand. The Old Testament required circumcision as a sign of covenant membership, but the first church council releases people from undergoing this painful rite (Acts 15). The Old Testament demanded the celebration of Passover, but Jesus turns this feast into the Lord's Supper. The Old Testament commanded God's people to celebrate the Sabbath on the seventh day, but the early church shifts the day of rest to the first day of the week. These and more contrasts came about because of Jesus' death on Good Friday and His resurrection on Easter Sunday. It is possible, therefore, to preach Christ by the way of contrast.

However, since contrast focuses on discontinuity rather than continuity, it is usually preferable to use one or more of the positive ways to move to Christ in the New Testament. For example when preaching on a text calling for animal sacrifice, instead of using contrast as a way to Christ, it is better to use typology, which acknowledges not only discontinuity (escalation) but also continuity (analogy). The animal sacrificed to atone for sin was a type of Christ, who would offer His life once for all. Therefore today we no longer offer animal sacrifices but are now called to offer our own bodies "as living sacrifices," not as sin offerings but as thank offerings for "God's mercy" (Rom. 12:1).