

Christ: The Goal of Preaching

THE PROBLEM

Recently I heard a sermon on I Samuel 17 (David and Goliath). The preacher was an expository preacher and dealt with the text masterfully. He was humorous without being a comedian, he had great illustrations, and he even mentioned some particularly relevant Hebrew words. His “Big Idea” was, of course, that we should not be daunted by the size of our problem, because the size of our God is incomparable. What a great point to drive home from this familiar text; something we constantly need to be reminded of. It was a great talk—encouraging and inspiring; but it was not preaching. It lacked something vital. What is the difference between great speaking and true Christian preaching? The difference is content; that is, what is being preached about.

Listening to at least half a dozen different “preachers” per week for the last few years has convinced me that there is a real crisis in preaching. Let me share with you a dangerous trend that I have noticed. First, “preachers” preach almost exclusively from the New Testament. For some reason they feel more comfortable in a world only 2 thousand years removed from their own than they do in one 3 or 4 thousand years removed. The second thing I have noticed is that “preachers” tend to preach predominantly what I call “Be good!” sermons. They choose their passage based on what moral principle they wish to extol on their congregation from week to week. These two trends work together beautifully. If someone actually does break one of the trends, he will almost certainly fall into the other one. In other words, if a preacher decides not to preach a morals-centered sermon, then he will typically preach from the New Testament. If he decides to be bold and preach from the Old Testament, he will almost always make the point of his sermon to emphasize worthy ethical principles that we should seek to follow. In fact, I can unfortunately say that I have heard very few sermons that sought to go against both of these trends by choosing an Old Testament text and preaching the actual divinely intended message. What is the divinely intended message running through every preaching passage in the Old Testament and the New? The answer is Christ.

SUGGESTED SOLUTION

Now I hope this was not a profound introduction. I hope you were not shocked to read that the message of the entire Bible is Christ. What’s more, I assume that you do actually know this already. You remember reading Luke’s words that “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27 NIV). I have never heard a preacher say that the OT is not about Christ, but most often preachers simply tack on the gospel message at the end of their sermon because they don’t actually know how to make the whole sermon point to Christ. Christ gets included, but is not the point of the exposition. Both my students and pastor-colleagues consistently ask me for ways to find Christ in the OT. You, too, may never have been shown how to actually find Christ in the OT. For this reason, I would like to present one simple way (there are others¹) to find Christ in virtually every passage in the OT.

STEP 1

The first thing we must realize is that God is the author of all of Scripture—both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Recognizing this allows us to accept that He had one big purpose in having all of this penned. Recognizing a divine author helps us realize that God may

¹ For a good summary of several others see Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

have had a special reason not only for the historical events but also for the writing about that history, and that this purpose may not have been perfectly known to the human authors.

STEP 2

Closely connected to this first step, is an acceptance of the Redemptive Historical Approach to the Bible. Remember the verse in Luke 24 that Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself? It is verses like this that convince me that somehow the OT is speaking of Christ even though he isn't explicitly mentioned there. Many scholars speak of the Christocentricity of the Old Testament and it is not my intent here to disparage this term. At the same time I need to qualify my promise of finding Christ in every passage by suggesting a slight hermeneutical modification. There is nothing wrong with the center of the Old Testament being Christ, but perhaps a better word might be the word "Christotelic."² While this may be unfamiliar, all I mean by it is that Christ is the *telos* or goal of the Old Testament. This avoids the danger of flattening out the OT and making it say something the OT human author may not have intended.³ With "Christotelic," we recognize that the Old Testament cannot be fully understood without the entire story and we read the Old Testament with the knowledge that Christ is the "end." The old covenants find their fulfillment in the new. This way of understanding the Bible assumes that we as Christians believe that the history that we read about in the Bible all leads up to that climactic event when God himself breaks in on history in the person of his Son, Jesus. Each covenant God makes in the Old Testament progressively reveals the plan God has. During the Exile, the prophets bring hope that restoration will take place, but the people of God continue in their old ways. For this reason, the true restoration is only ultimately fulfilled in the coming and death of Christ (and finally consummated in his second coming). What we absolutely must recognize is that both the Old Testament and the New Testament are eschatological—the New Testament just tells us how Christ fulfilled the Old Testament.

Fulfillment concerns more than direct prophecy. This step insists that every passage of the Bible is pointing to Christ. This is not the place to discuss the varying definitions of typology; I simply want to make the point that the OT records figures, shadows, or types of something that is only fully revealed in the new covenant. The relatively recent denigration of typology is an unfortunate byproduct of an overly modernistic and naturalistic worldview and we moderns must not forget that this typological "method" is employed by the very authors of the New Testament. Having qualified this "method" with the Christotelic approach, I want to show how typology does indeed fit properly as Christotelic and that is the point of step three.

STEP 3

The final step is recognizing the three anointed offices of covenant mediation in the Old Testament—prophet, priest, and king. Every prophet, priest and king is given a role of being between God and his people and is, therefore, able to mediate the demands of the covenant. We also know that Jesus fulfills all three of these offices in the New Testament: "Christ, as our Redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation." (*Westminster Shorter Catechism* #23). Why is it important that Christ fulfills these offices? These three offices are at the center of what it means to be in

² This terminology is not my own and I have not done justice to the idea in this brief paragraph. See Peter Enns, "Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving beyond a Modernist Impasse," *WTJ* 65 no. 2 (2003): 263-287.

³ It avoids forcing every verse of every Psalm and proverb into speaking *directly* about Christ.

relationship to God. The only way covenant can be established is if one of these offices mediates.

The three steps to finding Christ in the Old Testament are now established.

- 1) Recognize the human and divine authorship of the Bible.
- 2) Look at the Bible redemptive-historically—that all biblical history is leading to Christ.
- 3) Recognize that Jesus is the ideal Prophet, Priest, and King.

You already have enough information to enable you to find Christ anywhere in the OT. I am guessing you already understand steps 1 and 2, but this third one may be a bit new. Let me briefly illustrate how to do this third step.

PROPHET

First, you have to ask yourself “what do prophets do?” Prophets are ambassadors of God and in so doing they bring God’s word to the people—they preach. How does this help in our goal to find Christ? Anywhere you find people proclaiming God’s word in the Old Testament, you need to recognize that this proclamation of the word is fulfilled in Jesus. Hebrews even tells us that in times past, God spoke through his prophets, but now he speaks through his son (Heb 1:1). This means that all of the prophets’ proclamations or anything they do is only a shadow of the great prophet who proclaims God’s word and is God’s Word. When Nathan brings the word of the Lord to David after his sin with Bathsheba, he foreshadows that word that Jesus will bring a thousand years later. Even Jonah’s disobedience points us to the great prophet who will faithfully deliver the message with which he has been entrusted. Any and all prophetic roles, not just actual prophets, are fulfilled in Jesus. The Books of Moses include many commands and so proclaim God’s word. These proclamations also point directly to Christ. Answer #24 of the catechism says, “Christ executeth the office of a prophet in revealing to us, by his word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.”

PRIEST

Again, begin by asking what the role of a priest is. A priest prays and brings sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. His acts represent the forgiveness of God towards the people. How does this help someone preaching the OT? Anywhere you find any of these actions taking place, you should recognize that Christ performs these actions in a more complete way. In Ex 29 when the priests are consecrated for ministry we are supposed to recognize a great high priest who ministers on our behalf (Heb 4-10). Every prayer uttered in the Old Testament is a picture of the perfect mediator who never stops interceding for us. Even sinful acts of the priests can point to Christ. When Nadab and Abihu offer profane fire to God, we see their failure as pointing to a great priest who will not fail. Remember also that Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and with this to be separate and holy. Israel’s food laws, which were set up to distinguish them from the nations by keeping them separate from things unclean, foreshadow the holiness and separation of Christ, the great priest, who by his work has now purified all foods.⁴ Answer #25 of the catechism says, “Christ executeth the office of a priest in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us.” He is the propitiatory sacrifice, the one who makes friends of enemies, and the one who always prays for us.

KING

What are the roles of a king? His roles include fighting wars, building temples, protecting his people and simply representing God on earth. He is a special son of God. An ideal

⁴ This is just one of many examples given in Vern Poythress’ excellent book *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*. Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991.

king should always point to God's rule as supreme. For this reason anytime a battle is fought, a strategic plan is made, a temple is built, or an actual king appears, we are to see in this a foreshadowing of the Great King. Joshua in the conquest performs the role of a king. David, of course, is seen as an ideal king. The book of Esther—which never even mentions the name of God—is all about a king who (even though he is not of Israel) should by the nature of his position represent the Great King. Even genealogies are designed to point to certain “regular” people who have been told to have dominion over the earth (Gen 1:28). Mankind is made in the image of the Great King; and therefore, man's actions should point to God and therefore to Christ who fulfills this role. The always difficult Wisdom literature fits here as well. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes include kingly wisdom—wisdom granted to the king that he might rule well. Christ, the Great King is called the wisdom of God and rules perfectly and this wisdom comes down to man that he might rule as a vice-regent of his great king. Answer #26 of the catechism says, “Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.” Paul says that Jesus conquers those who were once hostile to him, reconciling them to himself. The gospels make clear that Jesus came to inaugurate his kingdom by fighting against death, disease, and demons (even binding the strongman) and that through his death and resurrection he is crowned.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Having detailed each office of covenant mediation, hopefully you can see one easy way to find Christ anywhere in the Old Testament. When you are preparing a sermon, first ask where in the History of Redemption does the story fall—is it during the patriarchs, the monarchy, the exile, etc.? Then examine your passage for activities that fall under the purview of a prophet, priest or king. I think you will find that virtually every passage says something about this. After finding the activities of these anointed offices, you must ask yourself how Christ fulfills these. Your final step is to create a sermon that both impacts the lives of the listeners and points them to Christ. There is certainly more to be said about how you follow Christ in prophetic, priestly and kingly roles and how Christ will one day consummate his kingdom, but that will await a future article.⁵

The David and Goliath sermon is not over when you have shown the congregants how to defeat their giants. It is preaching only when you show them that David, an ideal king, is a type of the truly ideal king who has defeated the ultimate evil on the cross. Consider the theme of Job: “why do bad things happen to good people?” There is nothing wrong with charging the congregation not to curse God and to know that God has a reason for everything even if we don't see it. This is fine, provided you show them the ultimate theodicy—Christ on the cross.

Although outside the scope of this article, I should quickly add that sermons on the NT should always include Christ as well. It is good to preach to take the log out of your own eye before judging others, but how much better to show that Christ is the ultimate judge and there are not logs in his eyes only a blood soaked one attached to his back. Please teach people to be moral and to do right, to love their spouses, to be good parents, to not covet their neighbors goods, but please, please, in every sermon, show them how all of the Scripture points to Christ.

A. W. Tozer said “I have suffered through many a dull and tedious sermon, but no sermon is poor or long when the preacher is showing me the beauty of Jesus.” Spurgeon said, “I sometimes wonder that you do not get tired of my preaching, because I do nothing but hammer

⁵ For more on this third step and consequent steps see Richard Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories* (Brentwood: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990), especially chapter 14 which started my thinking on this subject. It is largely his work which is summarized as Step 3.

away on this one nail. With me it is, year after year, ‘None but Jesus! None but Jesus!’” The problem with “Be good” sermons is that they can be preached in a kingdom hall, a synagogue or even a mosque. We must be different. Our goal is not just to teach Christians to behave well. Our goal is, as Spurgeon said, to hammer that one nail proclaiming Christ Jesus as the only Son of God, and our only hope for salvation. We must continue to preach the gospel to ourselves.

I hope you now see the importance behind preaching Christ and will take the time to both find him and proclaim him from the Old Testament. Maybe you need a constant reminder to do this. Maybe you will do what Dr. Russell Conwell did to his pulpit. On the back of the pulpit, he had inscribed these words: “We would see Jesus.” I beg of you as leaders of the church to preach the whole counsel of God, including the Old Testament, and to preach the message of Paul and all of the apostles—Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:23).