

Greidanus, Sydney. *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999. xvi + 373 pp. \$24.00 paper.

Introduction

There are numerous books, old and new, that address the subject of preaching. And rightly so, for there are many questions that surround this ancient, ecclesiastical practice. One of the main topics addressed by many of these books concerns the content of what is to be preached. If one has come to the conclusion that preaching should hold a position of primacy in the ministry of the church today (and one should have done so), the question that follows is, what should actually be preached? Further, to which testament, the Old or the New, should the modern preacher turn in selecting his text to preach? Is one preferable over the other? Once the target testament and text have been selected, should the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ have any impact on the content of what is being preached? In other words, should the progressive revelation of the New Testament text and Christ Himself affect the exposition of an Old Testament text? Historically, how has the church answered these questions in its pulpit ministries, and can its practices serve as models for preachers today? These are just some of the questions addressed in the book entitled *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*. The work is written by Sidney Greidanus, the professor of preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary, in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Summary

In light of the semi-recent introduction of rhetorical criticism, narrative criticism, and canonical criticism, Greidanus expresses concern that those who use these new methods exclusively may be caused to miss the heart of Scripture; “Will they know how to preach the Truth, Jesus Christ?” (xii). Therefore, the author writes this book with two primary goals in mind:

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).

Greidanus divides the book into 8 chapters. Within these chapters, the author addresses the subject of and source for preaching, the history of preaching Christ from the Old Testament, and methods of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. The content of the book follows a very logical flow.

In Chapter 1, the author addresses two topics: preaching Christ and preaching the Old Testament. First, he underscores the necessity of preaching Christ by confronting the confusion surrounding the topic. Next, he highlights the New Testament approach to “preaching Christ.” Greidanus defines “preaching Christ” as 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). He concludes the first topic with reasons for preaching Christ today.

With the case built for the necessity of preaching Christ, Greidanus begins his presentation for the necessity of preaching from the Old Testament. His reasoning is persuasive as he quotes Gleason Archer, “How can Christian pastors hope to feed their

flock on a well-balanced spiritual diet if they completely neglect the 39 books of Holy Scripture on which Christ and all the New Testament authors received their own spiritual nourishment?" (15). Continuing his case, he presents reasons for the lack of preaching from the Old Testament. This is followed by a convincing list of reasons for preaching from the Old Testament, as well as the New.

In Chapter 2, the writer bridges the two topics presented in Chapter 1 and speaks to the necessity of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. Greidanus mentions 3 main reasons for the lack of preaching Christ from the Old Testament: 1) the temptation of human-centered preaching; 2) a concern about forced interpretation; and 3) and the separation of the Old Testament from the New. And yet, the professor of preaching makes it clear that the Old Testament is unique in its character. It is not sub-Christian, non-Christian, or pre-Christian. Greidanus asserts that the Old Testament is Christian (44-45).

But how does the Old Testament relate to the New? The author points to a single redemptive history which underlies both testaments. Jesus Christ is seen as the missing link that connects the two. In light of Christ, the New Testament writers fused their writings with the Old Testament. The result is that the Old Testament should be interpreted from the perspective of the New.

Chapters 3 and 4 appear to begin a different section (though not formally recognized as such). Each is a historical account of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. Chapter 3 does a quality job in recounting the history of an allegorical (through the school of Alexandria), typological (through the school of Antioch), and

fourfold (literal, moral, spiritual, and eschatological) approaches to interpreting the Scriptures. Greidanus gives helpful evaluations of each.

Chapter 4 proves particularly fascinating by tracing certain key preachers in their interpreting and preaching of Christ from the Old Testament. Luther is described as having a “christological approach” to the Old Testament. Being concerned mainly with the issue of salvation and justification by faith, Luther’s primary goal was to find Christ in the Old Testament (127). He often did this at the expense of violating authorial intent.

Calvin, on the other hand, though affirming justification by faith in Christ, had a broader view point, namely the sovereignty and glory of God. This broader perspective enabled Calvin to be satisfied with biblical (more faithful to authorial intent) messages about God and His redemptive history (127). His purpose in preaching was to render transparent the text of Scripture itself (149). Calvin is described as having a “theocentric approach” to the Old Testament.

Two more modern christological interpretations were also examined, that of C. H. Spurgeon and Wilhelm Vischer. The more surprising hermeneutic of the two was Spurgeon. His main concern was the conversion of sinners (153). His philosophy was: “The best way to preach sinners to Christ is to preach Christ to sinners” (153). As beloved as this great man of God may be, his Old Testament hermeneutic can be, dare I say, “frightening.” Note Spurgeon’s instructions to a young preacher:

Don’t you know, young man, that from every town and every village 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 I ever 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 (153-154).

As noble as the goal of conversion may be, this type of hermeneutical practice cannot be endorsed for it treats authorial intent with disregard. Imagination and allegory are inadequate substitutes for the message of the original author.

In Chapter 5, Greidanus recounts New Testament principles for preaching Christ from the Old Testament. He counsels that Christ-centered preaching is to be God-centered, avoiding any imbalance in Trinitarian emphasis. His section on the New Testament use of the Old Testament is especially interesting and helpful (185). Later in the chapter, the author points out six roads which lead from the Old Testament to Christ: 1) the way of redemptive-historical progression; 2) the way of promise-fulfillment; 3) the way of typology; 4) the way of analogy; 5) the way of longitudinal themes; and 6) the way of contrast (203-225).

In Chapter 6, Greidanus proposes a method of preaching Christ from the Old Testament which falls somewhere between Calvin's "theocentric method" and Luther's "christological method." He calls it the "christocentric method" or the redemptive-historical christocentric method (227). He seeks to do justice to the fact that God's story of bringing His kingdom on earth is centered in Christ (227). The author asserts that the passage must be understood in its own historical context and in the contexts of canon and redemptive history. The remainder of the chapter points out various biblical examples of the redemptive-historical progression, promise-fulfillment, typology, analogy, New Testament references, and contrast being used to present Christ from the Old Testament.

In Chapter 7, the author explains his 10 step process for moving from an Old Testament text to a christocentric sermon. The steps are as follows: 1) select a textual unit with an eye to congregational needs; 2) read and reread the text in its literary

context; 3) outline the structure of the text; 4) interpret the text in its own historical setting; 5) formulate the text's theme and goal; 6) understand the message in the context of canon and redemptive history; 7) formulate the sermon theme and goal; 8) select a suitable sermon form; 9) prepare the sermon outline; and 10) write the sermon in an oral style. These steps are then applied to Genesis 22.

Chapter 8 is a demonstration of the author's christocentric method practiced on some of the Old Testament texts that have been more commonly interpreted allegorically. The book concludes with exercises in using the christocentric method.

Critical Evaluation

This book is strong in several areas. The goals of preaching Christ and preaching the Old Testament are exemplary. This emphasis is much needed in a climate that does not champion biblical and theological exposition. The presentation of the material is logical. The layout of the work flows nicely. The non-technical nature makes it an easy read. Greidanus puts forth some fascinating, thought-provoking, historical highlights which caused this reviewer to reconsider the legitimacy of some of the exegetical work of the giants of the past (especially Luther and Spurgeon). Further, the author includes helpful summaries and evaluations of the various ways to preach Christ from the Old Testament.

Concerning weaknesses of the book, there are a few. One minor weakness is the author's "sneaky" covenantalism. While not wanting to judge the motive, his method of communication was "smooth," yet questionable. For example, when discussing the redemptive-historical interpretation of Genesis 17:9-14, Christian preachers are directed to examine what happens to this "ordinance" in redemptive history. According to

Greidanus, the preacher will “discover” in the redemptive-historical context that the “sign” of circumcision has now shifted to baptism (232). Greidanus doesn’t even address the fact that this presupposition is highly debated between dispensational and covenantal camps. Therefore, for the unsuspecting reader, the transition appears quite natural, though nonetheless questionable. Again, when encouraging the use of analogy, the author writes that preachers

should enquire about the analogy between what God is and does for Israel and what God in Christ is and does for the church. They should inquire about the similarity between what God teaches his people Israel and what Christ teaches his church. And they should search for parallels between God’s demands in the Old Testament and Christ’s demands in the New Testament. Although there will be differences because of the progression in the histories of redemption and revelation, analogy concentrates on locating the continuity, the parallels, between what God is and does for Israel, teaches Israel, or demands of Israel, and what God in Christ is and does for the church, teaches the Church, or demands of the church (263).

This “sneaky” behavior is continued once again with this comment, “Through Christ, the Psalms of Israel are now also the songs of the new Israel, the church. *This assumption* (emphasis mine) enables the church to read and sing and pray the Psalms directly as their doxology or lament” (265). Since this book is aimed at seminary students, preachers, and scholars, they, of course, should be familiar with this debate. Greidanus however, communicates his points as if no dispute exists. Again, this weakness is minor, but nonetheless noteworthy.

The main weakness of the book is the acceptance of a “christological hermeneutic.” Christology is a field of theology, not a hermeneutic. To seek to interpret Scripture from this christological perspective sets the stage for eisegesis. Greidanus himself recognizes and warns against the practice of “christomonism,” the preaching of Christ in isolation from God (178), or any imbalance in the trinitarian emphasis (Chapter

5). He also warns against overlooking the historical context of the passage and reading Christ back into the passage (the error of Luther, Spurgeon, and Vischer in some instances). In his desire to preach Christ, however, it seems as though he opens himself to the eisegesis he wishes to avoid. In fact, some of his statements lead the reader to believe that *every text* must somehow point to Christ. For example, while building a case for the unity of the Old and New Testaments, the author views them both as communicating a single redemptive story with Christ uniting the two (a view with which this reviewer agrees). But consider these statements: “The Old Testament must be interpreted not only in its own context but also in the context of the New Testament. . . . Since the heart of the New Testament is Jesus Christ, this means that *every message* (emphasis mine) from the Old Testament must be seen the light of Jesus Christ” (51). But how far should one carry this practice? Or consider this word of instruction, “Christ (is) the center of redemptive history, Christ (is) the center of the Scriptures. In preaching any part of Scripture, one must understand its message in the light of that center, Jesus Christ” (227). If this is true, the next step for the “faithful preacher” is to find the way to preach Christ from whatever text in which he finds himself! This is to be pursued through one or more of the six methods outlined by Greidanus. As well intentioned as this goal may be, it is not that easy to accomplish. How, for instance, should this be practiced with a text like Proverbs 31?

As far as developing an expository disposition toward preaching, the book offers some notable help. The *steps* designed to move one from an Old Testament text to a “christocentric sermon” are beneficial. The emphasis on paying attention to the historical

setting and original message of the author is commendable. However, the encouragement toward a christocentric hermeneutic can tempt the reader to deviate from authorial intent.

Conclusion

Overall, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* is well written and thought provoking. As a result of reading this book, the desire of this reviewer to preach the Old Testament has been increased. But coupled with that is the desire to preach it accurately. This desire for accuracy was fanned by some of the heroes of the faith and their misuse of the Old Testament. Balance is the key. Calvin had the noble goal: “to render transparent the text of Scripture itself.” And when the text points to Christ, so should we. But if the Spirit-inspired New Testament writers did not sense an Old Testament witness to Christ, the question remains, “Should we?”