

“The Role of the Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching”  
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## Reclaiming the OT for the Contemporary Pulpit

### Introduction

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this preaching enrichment endeavor. We are in the midst of an important time at Oklahoma Christian, especially in the College of Biblical Studies with the new M.Div. program. I am grateful to be back at Oklahoma Christian. I am thankful for the efforts of Shon Smith and others, whose efforts make our presence here today possible. I am especially thankful for your presence.

Those who know me best know that I face a dilemma with such a broad assignment as the use of the OT in preaching. My tendency is to put on my academic hat, parade out many of the most important concepts and theories of OT preaching, to include a little bit of theology, OT centers, surveys, sermon types, and on and on.... We could easily spend our time summarizing and reminding of these kinds of things, things that are very important. We are preachers charged with communicating the Word of God to the people of God, and we should have some passing acquaintance and familiarity with such things.

Another side of me yearns for a different approach--a practical approach. It is a felt need forged in decades of preaching—five decades if you allow me a liberal numbering system, an accession numbering system. It is because of this more practical desire that I have chosen a specific title—“Reclaiming the OT for the Contemporary Pulpit”, also the title of Donald Gowan’s book.

Perhaps this will seem a strange beginning point, but I want to begin in the NT with a text from the letter of Paul to the Romans, set in the context of Paul’s yearning for Israel to accept the gospel. The passage is Romans 10:14-17.

*14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" 16 But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" 17 Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*

I present that which I desire to say with two points: (1) reclaiming the OT, (2) for the contemporary pulpit.

## RECLAIMING THE OLD TESTAMENT

The first matter is to explore the word I have chosen—reclaiming. This suggests that there has been a time in the past when the OT was proclaimed, when the OT was the subject of sermons in the Christian church. The text of Romans, with many other NT texts, says just that. The public proclamation of the Word of God was, for the church in the first century, the primary means of transmitting the gospel. The importance of sermons in the history of the early church is visible in the Lucan narratives of Acts. In a quick survey of Acts, one might think of Peter's sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36), Peter's sermon in Solomon's porch (3:11-26), and the sermon to Cornelius with family and friends (10:34-43). Additionally, one could consider Stephen's presentation of the gospel before the Sanhedrin (7:2-53) and Philip's proclamation in Samaria (8:4-5). Perhaps you are thinking of Philip and the eunuch, a personal sermon or teaching beginning in Isaiah. One might think also of Paul's many missionary sermons, with two outstanding but very different examples being those in Antioch of Pisidia (13:13-43) and in Athens (17:22-31). All of these had strong foundations in the OT Scriptures, and these sections of Acts are filled with OT quotations.

Preaching was not the only way the gospel was communicated. Individual instruction and private Bible study were also important (Acts 17:11; 18:26). Nevertheless, preaching remained at the heart of the proclamation of the early church, and the last verse of Acts has Paul "preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ openly and unhindered" (28:31).

That preaching was to continue, as God's plan for proclamation beyond the generation of the apostles is evident in Rom. 10:14-17. One would expect to find significant instruction concerning the importance of preaching in the Pastoral Epistles. Paul wrote to Timothy: Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching (1 Tim. 4:13). In the second epistle he wrote: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction (2 Tim. 4:2). This passage underscores the fact that preaching included not only evangelistic messages directed to outsiders but also sermons that would instruct, admonish, and encourage insiders as their situation demanded. Paul's instructions to Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:15-17 suggest the importance of preaching for the church:

*...and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

This passage reflects four distinct uses of the word of God. These four are not limited to outsiders, but were a part of the experience of Timothy. It seems the primary reference of the text is to Timothy and to the man of God, that the primary application is to Christians. In fact, many of the NT references to the Scriptures likely are references to the OT Scriptures.

## FOR THE CONTEMPORARY PULPIT

The premise of this presentation is that preaching is still essential for the church—both the preaching of the gospel and preaching which communicates the word of God.<sup>1</sup> I am thankful for a renewed interest in preaching, and the increasing recognition of its importance. As one example, consider the increasing popularity of sermon seminars. Books on sermons are big business and I see an increased emphasis on homiletics in seminary curricula and in Christian colleges and universities. When churches send requests for ministers, the requests are generally similar in at least one matter—they include a phrase something like this, “Send us someone who can preach.” A great problem arises when one sends out those who cannot preach.

These observations and experiences suggest to me a contemporary crisis in preaching, a crisis about which I have written more than once, a crisis which has not yet been resolved. The crisis is not a crisis of method but of message—a crisis that fails to approach the text as primary resource.<sup>2</sup> The crisis in preaching as practiced among us is visible in our inability to reflect accurately the theological center, and thus the message, of the biblical text. It is obvious in our tendency toward nice little homilies that would play well in virtually any church building in our community. This crisis is more obvious in our efforts to treat the OT than in our preaching from the NT, I think because of our ignorance of the OT. I believe that the problem is growing, probably because of our increasing ignorance of the NT. This is a crisis seen in the inability to connect people with God through the preaching of God’s Word. When preaching does not connect people with God, we need more Bible, more theology, and more text—not less. The current crisis in preaching is also visible in the sharpening challenge issued to those who live between the times, to those who live transitionally, caught as it were between two worlds while appearing to have an existence in both worlds.

I focus the nature of the crisis or problem in a series of questions that often arise in the preacher’s study. The progression of these questions illustrates the subtle shift that has occurred.<sup>3</sup>

**What can I say?** This question leads to topical, needs-oriented, cultural understandings, rummage through text to find appropriate springboard, think of good illustrations, even begin with illustrations, authority is in preacher.

**What does this text say?** This question puts the Bible in primary position, with authority in text, but often divorces the sermon/preacher/church from the life setting.

**What can I say that is interesting that (loosely) connects to the text?** This clearly puts the text as a springboard, and the authority for this kind of preaching returns to the preacher. In the last quarter of the previous century, the focus on experience in our culture lead to another approach: the desire to both understand the text and to experience the text, with

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<sup>1</sup>The distinction between kerygma and gospel, the first for the church and the second for the unbeliever, is heard less frequently today . In the NT, it seems doctrine and gospel are presented to both insiders and outsiders.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix A surveys some of the ways in which one may approach the biblical text with special focus on OT studies.

<sup>3</sup> The restricted survey of sermon types in Appendix B may be helpful as background in considering these questions.

experience perhaps being primary. New struggles arose: how to find the original intent of the author, historical-grammatical-literary backgrounds, new concerns with the aesthetic cut of the text, the language event, reader response, new hermeneutical questions, etc.

**What does this text say that I must say to this group on this occasion?** This demands theological preaching, and we are not very good at this when it comes to the OT. This is true largely because we are not students of the OT. How does the OT work? What things from the OT are practical? How does one experience this part of the word of God? How does one communicate a message from God, the message of this text for this day? This kind of preaching demands a coherent center that begins in the text and moves to the contemporary world.<sup>4</sup>

I am reminded of the wonderful illustration used by Fred Craddock in his little book, *As One Without Authority*, where he describes the preaching process as bridge building. While it is not my intention here to survey all of the fine points involved in the metaphor, what should be clear is that this picture of the preaching event demands a solid foundation on both sides of the chasm, that is, in the text and in the experiences of the hearers. John Stott makes a similar point in his work on preaching, *Between Two Worlds*. This demands that one honor the occasional nature of the sermon.

### **INITIAL STEPS TOWARD RECLAMATION**

All of this I have set forth to provide support for my premise that we need to reclaim the Old Testament in our pulpits. I would be remiss were I to conclude without some suggestions concerning how this might be done, that is, to identify some of the issues in this kind of OT preaching.

The concept of reclamation suggests a return to usefulness. Where do we need to go to return the OT text to usefulness in our sermons?

1. Develop a theology of preaching. Why do you preach? The point of beginning is not how, but why.
  - Understand the audacity of claiming to speak for God
  - What is the relationship between the prophetic, priestly, and pastoral tasks of preaching?
  - What is the relationship between preaching, worship, and pastoral ministry?
2. Develop a theology to inform preaching—nature of God, salvation, atonement, etc. The OT provides rich backgrounds for these understandings.
3. Develop a clear understanding of the source of authority in preaching
  - The relationship between the authority of Scripture and the authority of the preacher
  - The relationship between the living word, the written word, the spoken word, and the word living again in our lives.
  - The authority of the church to inform exegesis, the dynamics of the local congregation with its changing needs, views, issues, etc.

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<sup>4</sup> An expansion of some of the problems and pitfalls appears in Appendix C.

**Conclusion**

It is my hope that we might rediscover the OT in the proclamation process of the church. That we might recover its value, find foundations for understanding of God's involvement in our world, identify the people of God across the centuries, and be refreshed by its insights and applications in better understanding the NT and in finding orientation to the realities of our world.

## APPENDIX A

### How does one approach the text?

How do you decide what is “the message” of any given text?

1. Dogmatic didactic approach (descriptive theology)
  - a. Sees the Bible as propositional truth
  - b. Tends to bring predetermined categories to the text as “filters,” similar to systematic theology
  - c. May see the OT as a legal document
  - d. Tends to treat different genres in the same way; does not vary the preaching approach based on different genres
2. Cross-sectional approach (examples: typology and covenant)
  - a. Cuts across the grain, and compares the results
  - b. Easily develops topics and themes, or at least correlating concepts
  - c. Creation; promise-fulfillment; people of God-church.
3. Diachronic approach
  - a. Historical reconstruction
  - b. Cuts with the grain, break into components
  - c. (synchronic—put it back together again)
4. Multiplex theological approach (OT/biblical canonical theology)
  - a. Effort to bridge from the meant to the means
  - b. Recognizes that the Bible is both historical and theological, attempts to use it in both ways
  - c. Recognizes that while there are different emphases in the Bible, even different theological emphases, there cannot be different theologies.
  - d. Does not expect a full picture of God. God is not trying to give us information about himself, but desires to reveal himself as a person.
  - e. Requires that various biblical books be seen in their historical setting. Tries to treat the text on a canonical level.

## APPENDIX B

### OT preaching and types of sermons

1. Expository
  - a. Is for many considered the purest “biblical preaching”
  - b. Seeks a primary message from a single text
  - c. Tends toward a sequential, serial use of texts
  - d. Can be micro or macro
  - e. Observations
    - i. Text sets agenda
    - ii. Text has authority
    - iii. May tend toward “equalizing” the Bible
    - iv. Is not verse by verse
2. Theological
  - a. Sees core issues, emphases, themes
  - b. May explore the theology of a book or author
  - c. May treat all of a subdivision or testament (or even develop a theology of Scripture)
3. Topical
  - a. Denigrated more than it should be, for it has a legitimate function
  - b. Usually focuses on a contemporary issue or question
  - c. Requires that one do all of the exegetical work
  - d. Must not ignore the responsibility to reflect a biblical theology
  - e. Biographical (as a subset of topical) presents special pitfalls
    - i. Psychologizing; may lead us to read into the text
    - ii. Narrative; may miss the impact or misread motives
    - iii. Omission; may ignore important texts
    - iv. Mis-emphasis; Danger of making the character the hero instead of God

## APPENDIX C

### Problems and Pitfalls

#### The preaching process

- Where does the authority for preaching come from?
- How will the church learn what to believe?
- How will the church learn how to believe?
- Is the authority in the preacher, the Bible, or God?
- The authority clearly resides in the preacher in moralistic preaching (the “ought” without the “why”) or topical preaching which is really little more than proof-texting.
- With such authority, one most always asks the preacher for the answer; such preachers are all too willing to give an answer; and preachers become the authority rather than the word.

#### Considerations with regard to the text

- Failure to define the pericope or text.
- Failure to determine literal and figurative language.
- Temptation to omit relevant passages because we do not understand them, are unfamiliar with them, or even ignorant of them.
- Temptation to omit relevant passages because they do not fit our biases.
- Failure to sort out examples that are condemned. We must distinguish what the Bible (dis)approves.
- Failure to differentiate straightforward teaching and sarcasm.
- Failure to distinguish singular and plural—pronouns, imperatives, adjectives.
- Temptation to approach OT text on basis of what it must mean based on how it is applied in the NT.
- Assuming that words are unchanged in meaning from previous times, e.g. soul, redeemer, know, man, save.
- Temptation to deal with critical issues in the pulpit, e.g. documentary hypothesis, authorship questions, technical phrases, archaeology, etc.
- Word studies—is there such an animal as “original meaning?” Resolve to escape the “root fallacy” of etymology. Consider phrases and meanings. Are there passages which address a word/concept without using the word.
- Temptation to arrange material according to our own thinking rather than letting the Bible guide the study process.
- Omission of relevant passages that are inconvenient to our point or even contradict our conclusion, e.g. imprecatory psalms, etc.
- Failure to sift the important from the indifferent. The Bible is not a level playing field.

NOT MUCH TEACHING OCCURS IN THE PULPIT—THE PULPIT IS LARGELY FOR THE PURPOSE OF  
REMINDER!

## APPENDIX D

### **A process for engaging the text**

#### 1. Backgrounds

Theological presuppositions, paradigm comparisons; biblical authority; historical considerations—the world of the Bible; exegesis of today's society, culture; exegesis of your congregation. How you see the text, the church, God, yourself, the world, etc.

#### 2. Hearing the text

Reading, prayer, devotional response, macro, micro

#### 3. Preliminary exegesis

Literary analysis, historical analysis, theological analysis → leads to tentative conclusion about meaning of the text.

#### 4. Interesting detour

Critical commentaries, journals, opportunity to identify issues not previously considered.

#### 5. THE Decision

This is what the text is about on this occasion—the primary function, fundamental message, try to get it into a single sentence.

#### 6. Homiletic focus/purpose

Turn again to the hearers, how move from meant to means, original text had function and form, how be honest and true to original text? What is the homiletic purpose? Point the text to the church. What do you want them to do, believe, change?

#### 7. Strategies

Various sermon shapes and strategies function differently. Try to match the sermon strategy or shape with the text for effect. One cannot always imitate the textual form, but preaching must try to reflect that form with sensitivity. This considers genre, tone, form, meter, etc.

#### 8. Now you have enough information to outline and begin to form the sermon.

### **A word about preaching from various genres**

1. Historical narrative
2. Legal material
3. Poetry
4. Wisdom literature
5. Prophetic literature
6. Apocalyptic