



What Are We Looking For in the Bible?



by Michael S. Horton

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We must not tell chiefly of people, of their faith as an attracting example and of their sins as a repelling example, but we must tell of the revelation of the grace of God in Christ.¹ Author of the remarkably useful four-volume set, *Promise and Deliverance* (Paidea Press), S. G. De Graaf in the above quote sounds a note that seems to have all but vanished even in much of Reformed preaching and Bible-instruction these days. It is part of a method of biblical interpretation that has been a hallmark of Reformed hermeneutics (interpretation), in opposition to rationalistic, pietistic, subjective, moralistic and mystical tendencies. In this brief space, I want to appeal to my own Reformed colleagues to give greater attention to this so-called "redemptive-historical" method. In that spirit, I have chosen more of an "open letter" format over a more in-depth survey of perspectives. For the latter, a number of works could be recommended.²

Are We Missing the Point When We Study the Bible?

Calvin Theological Seminary professor Sidney Greidanus has provided a masterful overview of the Dutch debates of the 1930's and while the historical details may not be relevant for most readers, the issues raised cannot be dismissed in our own situation.³

While the liberal Protestants on the Continent were already busily engaged in downplaying the historical dimension of revelation, emphasizing the ethical, psychological and spiritual applications provided by the various biblical writers, a number of prominent Reformed theologians saw similar, if less overt, problems within conservative congregations. According to Greidanus, biblical interpretation during the early part of the century was often marked by the following three tendencies:

1. The Illustrative Interpretation

In this approach, David and Jonathan teach us about friendship; Hannah's prayer for a child teaches us about persistent prayer; Jacob's struggle with God at Peniel illustrates our spiritual struggle; David's defeat of Goliath teaches us about conquering the "Goliaths" of our life; Joshua teaches us how to be leaders, and so on. Similarly, then, the New Testament figures--including Jesus--are there chiefly to illustrate "life lessons." D. Van Dijk, one of the defenders of the redemptive-historical view, warned that the illustrative approach reduces the sacred events of redemptive history to little more than a lesson we could have

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learned as well from any other non-biblical figure: "Appealing to the normative pronouncements of Scripture, I could as well preach on the death of Prince William I in this exemplary manner as I could on, e.g., the death of Jacob; I could as well hold up Napoleon as a deterrent example as, e.g., Nebuchadnezzar because in both cases the normativity must be carried in from elsewhere."⁴ In other words, such interpretations assume there is a "truth" lying somewhere beyond Scripture (or at least beyond this particular text) that is illustrated by this biblical passage or figure. But that is to deny sola Scriptura in practice, importing non-biblical "truths" to the text under consideration. Can we not find better examples than David in non-biblical history?

2. The Fragmentary Interpretation

Here, the unity of revelation in one historical progression of God's plan in Christ is broken up by a number of "histories." "They dissolve Holy Scripture into a series of spiritual, edifying fragments," said Klass Schilder. "The one Word of God is shattered into many words about God, and the one work of God [redemption] is dissected into many separate works which are related somehow to God and religion."⁵

3. The Atomistic Interpretation

Closely related to the fragmentary approach, this method isolates a text or the person or event from the whole fabric of redemptive history. Instead of asking, "Where does Aaron or Peter fit into the broad sweep of God's fulfillment of his covenant promise in Christ?", one asks, "What does this one verse mean?" Verse-by-verse approaches as well as inductive Bible study methods fall into this category and while the preacher may feel some sense of accomplishment in having dissected the sentence, it is hardly the Bread of Life, as one of the critics warns: "Either all kinds of practical remarks are tacked onto the several parts of the text with the result that the sermon, because the main theme was not caught, does not exhibit any unity and the hearers complain that it sticks together like sand--either that, or the sermon centers around one particular 'atom' which has been abstracted from the totality of the text."⁶

Six Reasons Why We Fail To Hear Christ In Preaching

Even more menacing are the preaching approaches that arise out of these interpretive methods. Here Greidanus offers examples of the sort of preaching that results:

1. *Biographical Preaching*

In the illustrative approach, we end up preaching Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, Paul and Mary, but not Christ! Or if we do "preach Christ," he is simply one more of these biblical examples to lead us on our way. It is deeply human-centered rather than God-centered and, therefore, Christ-centered. Again this begs the question: Why can we not use the Qur'an for such biographical preaching? After all, many of the same moral "truths" are there as well.

2. *Psychologizing*

It is likely that many readers heard sermons during Passion Week that guided hearers to reflect on Mary's grief, Peter's inner turmoil, Judas' emotional state, and the states of our Lord's soul. But can one really say that these appear in the text as clearly or at least as centrally as the sermon seems to have indicated? Do we think that the culmination of the sacrificial system of the Lamb of God is less interesting and relevant than, say, a presumed similarity between Paul's Damascus Road conversion and our own? Often in this approach, hearers are directed to the inner life of biblical characters in order to discover their own inner life: "Do I have this kind of faith? Am I willing to do what so-and-so did?" Thus, it will inevitably lead not to a self-examination that leads us to despair of ourselves and seek Christ alone outside of us, but to a labyrinth of self-absorption. This method, says Holwerda, buries "the real content of the text under an avalanche of edifying remarks."⁷

3. *Spiritualizing*

In this approach too, history is pushed aside in an attempt to "get beneath" the actual story of God's speaking and acting. The woman reaching out to touch Jesus' garment simply becomes an allegory for our receiving Christ and the wedding feast at Cana becomes an invitation to Jesus today. The critics of this approach rightly concluded that this is to return to the allegorizing method of Alexandria that had enjoyed so much success in medieval preaching and was overthrown by the Reformation.

4. *Moralizing*

Of all the epithets attached to the all-too-popular style of preaching in the modern era, the charge of moralism is the most frequent and not without reason. Every other tendency we have described is a handmaiden to this chief abuse of Scripture within conservative Protestant circles. As Greidanus describes moralism, it is "the (semi) Pelagian tendency which denies sola gratia...Moralistic preaching is legalistic; it issues imperatives without the divine indicative; it makes of the gospel a moral law."⁸ None of the critics complained that there was any overt rejection of Reformed theology in favor of Arminian or Roman Catholic dogma, but that in an effort to be relevant and practical, the text was forced to say something other than what it really said. Surely God could have picked better moral examples than Abraham and Sarah or the crafty Jacob or David the adulterer and murderer. Van Dijk wrote, "At best one may say that a few good, scriptural remarks were occasioned by the text, but that is, strictly speaking, no longer Ministry of the Word...For then the content of the sermon is determined not by the text itself but by the preacher's ingenuity."⁹

5. *Typologizing*

"A few examples of typologizing in sermons of the thirties are: Joseph's obedience in looking for his brothers is a prophetic type of Christ's obedience; his sale to the Ishmaelites prefigures Christ's being sold by Judas...."¹⁰ At least the motive here is to preach Christ and to preach him as the promised Messiah, but it fails to allow the text to speak for itself, to point to Christ in its own way. Christ is already present there in the text, whether Old or New Testament, and we do not have to tack him on somehow to the story.

6. *Doctrinal Preaching*

We love doctrine as Reformation people, and doctrine prepares us as nothing else for our task as preachers. Thus, the Bible must be studied carefully in order to discern what its unified teaching is concerning the major doctrines it reveals. However, the redemptive-historical model follows the Reformers in insisting that the preached Word is not merely a word about God or Christ, but is itself the Word of God! Therefore, the goal is not merely to explain doctrines and lecture about these important truths, but to actually bring Christ to the people through the proclamation. The point is not to educate or to instruct (this is hopefully done thoroughly in other contexts), but to break open the Rock in the wilderness, to allow the water to flow to the thirsty. This does not mean that we avoid doctrine in our sermons, but that we see our mission in preaching as sacramental (i.e., God giving his grace) rather than merely educational. In the words of the Second Helvetic Confession, "The preached Word is, in a special sense, the Word of God."

How A Preacher Can Be Reformed Without His Parishioners Knowing It?

These critics of the various types of preaching we have described, Greidanus included, have been concerned that the pietistic, mystical and subjective streak in Protestantism--tendencies that were dominant in the preaching before the Reformation--had become routine even in circles in which orthodox theology was insisted upon officially. It is not a question of heresy, but of biblical interpretation. Similarly, one often hears the same sermons in churches deeply

and honestly committed to Reformation confessions that one might have heard growing up in Roman Catholicism, liberal Protestantism, or Arminian fundamentalism and evangelicalism. This happens for various reasons.

First, many pastors are concerned that their churches are full of the unconverted, and with good reason. To be sure, there are many hypocrites in our churches who do not have the fruit of righteousness because there is no root. But this has always been true, as Calvin, echoing Augustine and Paul, recognized: "There are many wolves within and sheep without." But our Dutch defenders of the redemptive-historical method warn us of taking God's work into our own hands here. Exemplary preaching (i.e., preaching Bible examples) makes sense if one's greatest interest is in separating the sheep from the goats by taking inventory: "One Sunday Abraham would be held up as the hero of faith, followed by the application: Do you have that faith also?...The next Sunday we would be told that as Jacob we must know our 'Jabbok' or at least our 'Peniel'...Then again it was the soul of Peter, of Judas, of Pilate, etc."¹¹ "Did Christ arise in your heart?", say these critics, becomes a way of separating the wheat from the chaff, but it is "the curse of mysticism that festers in our circles. It imposes an entirely different problem on us than does the Gospel. The Gospel says: Easter is really a fact! Do you believe that? But mysticism says: That Jesus arose in Joseph's garden we believe all right, but the really important question is: Did he arise in your soul?...Decisive is the repetition of Easter in everyone personally."¹²

How often do believers lose the joy of their salvation as a result of exhortation-centered preaching that drives them to take inventory of their fruit-bearing? Some consider such an emphasis key to vital spirituality, but how can one know if he or she has really experienced "Easter" sufficiently or possesses the faith illustrated in the lives of Bible "heroes"? We ought to heed the counsel of the defenders of the redemptive-historical approach in their advice to preach the gospel to everyone and not to attempt to sift through God's harvest. We must trust the Word, both Law and Gospel, to do its work in God's sovereign hands. Constant inwardness and self-examination with the purpose of discerning sufficient faith or grace in one's heart or its fruit in one's life will only lead to either self-righteousness or despair: "How in the world," Van Dijk asks, "could one ever expect to come to certitude in this way?"¹³ How indeed. As Calvin insisted, our mission as pastors is to preach faith, not doubt; to lead them to Christ's sufficiency, not to their own.

Second, many pastors are more worried about the moral condition of the nation and of their own congregation than any other matter. One can view, for instance, a prominent conservative Presbyterian minister on television on any given Lord's Day and be likely to hear a sermon that leads off with one or two lines from the Bible (never to reappear) before launching into the real message: America's moral decline, the dangers of Clinton, and the importance of family values. Most of these sermons could be preached by a Mormon if Christ were not tacked on at the end in an invitation to receive Christ. (Perhaps these days even that would not distinguish the two religions.) Often, more time is given to the exegesis of the Constitution and the letters of the founding fathers than to the Gospel and the letters of the apostles.

I realize that this is an extreme example, but it has been repeated in varying degrees across the landscape as I have encountered it. It is the experience of a growing chorus of frustrated parishioners who are tired of receiving stones for bread. If it isn't American values, it is self-esteem, career guidance, tips for life of some sort: "How To Get Up When Life's Got You Down," or some such drivel. I recently preached in a large conservative evangelical church in which the title "sermon" in the bulletin was replaced with "Life Perspectives." Had people come expecting a Word of salvation from God or a "life perspective" from Horton?

Does it matter? If it doesn't matter, we are no better than the liberal churchmen whose sentimental, moralistic, political, psychological, mystical and subjective orations we have criticized for so long. But enough of the bad news. Allow me to finish my jeremiad by outlining the basic features of the redemptive-historical approach, and again I will summarize the points made so well by Greidanus:

1. Redemptive History is History

The triumph of Barth in many Reformed circles not only led to a collapse of the Law into the Gospel, but created a Kierkegaardian "paradoxical" dualism between history and supra-history. Still saddled with this liberal dualism between faith and history, neo-orthodoxy and pietism often tend to downplay the fact that, as Paul told Festus, these events did not take place in a corner. They were public and historical, not simply individual and subjective. This is Luther's point when he stresses "Christ extra nos," Christ outside of us, in opposition to mysticism. Redemptive-historical preaching and Bible reading, therefore, will focus on every text as a part of one seamless fabric of promise and fulfillment. The whole Bible is concerned with history--not with history in general, but with the unfolding of God's redemptive plan in Christ from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible is not about me or the problems of my generation, but about specific saving events in the past, present and future that incorporate me into a community, a "cloud of witnesses."

2. Redemptive History is a Unity

This is why a lot of redemptive-historical preaching is done from the Old Testament as well as the New. The Law and the Gospel run from the beginning to the end of the Bible and the revelation of Christ is like a light that grows brighter as the story progresses. Instead of breaking this story up into dispensations or atomistic verses, we should see the Bible as talking about the same thing from beginning to end: Christ, and the covenant of grace through which the believer is united to and participates in his life.

3. Redemptive History Means Progression

Some, in reaction against dispensationalism, make so much of the unity of revelation that they neglect the differences between the Old and New Covenants and fail to distinguish the national promises made to Israel from the saving promises made to the New Israel. We must always be ready to announce the new stages of revelation and redemption as they are brought into view by the text.

Conclusion

But is all of this biblical? In other words, are we imposing an approach on the text that is not there--precisely what we are accusing others of doing? Audaciously, Jesus accused the biblical scholars of his day of not knowing the Scriptures (Mt 29:29; Lk 24:45) and declared, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (Jn 5:39). After his Resurrection, our Lord explained the Scriptures on the Emmaeus road. But first, he sharply rebuked the two disciples for failing to read the Old Testament with himself at the center: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!...And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). Imagine the power of that sermon! No wonder their hearts burned within them. Jesus here teaches us how we are to read and preach the Bible. It is not chiefly about Bible heroes or lessons in life, but the revelation of Christ. Similarly, Peter reminds us that the chief message of the entire Old Testament is "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Pt 1:10-11).

To preach the Bible as "the handbook for life," or as the answer to every question, rather than as the revelation of Christ, is to turn the Bible into an entirely different book. This is how the Pharisees approached Scripture, however, as we can see clearly from the questions they asked Jesus, all of them amounting to something akin to Trivial Pursuits: "What happens if a person divorces and remarries?" "Why do your disciples pick grain on the Sabbath?" "Who sinned--this man or his parents--that he was born blind?" For the Pharisees, the Scriptures were a source of trivia for life's dilemmas. To be sure, Scripture provides God-centered and divinely-revealed wisdom for life, but if this were its primary objective, Christianity would be a religion of self-improvement by following examples and exhortations, not a religion of the Cross. This is Paul's point with the Corinthians, whose obsession with wisdom and miracles had obscured the true wisdom and the greatest miracle of all. And what is that? Paul replies, "He has been made for us our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor 1:28-31).

Notes

1. S. G. De Graaf, cited in Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing, 1970), 27.
2. See Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Eerdmans, 1975); *When The Time Had Fully Come* (Paideia Press, 1982); Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980); *Biblical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1948, 1985); Gerard Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament* (Baker, 1990); S. G. De Graaf, *Promise & Deliverance*, 4 volumes (Paideia Press, 1981); Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 2 volumes (self-published, 1986); Edmund Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Christ In The Old Testament* (NavPress, 1988).
3. Sidney Greidanus, *op. cit.*
4. *Ibid.*, 59.
5. *Ibid.*, 62.
6. *Ibid.*, 63.
7. *Ibid.*, 76.
8. *Ibid.*, 79.
9. *Ibid.*, 82.
10. *Ibid.*, 83.
11. Klass Schilder, cited in Greidanus, *op. cit.*, 96.
12. *Ibid.*, 96.

Hermeneutics and Christ

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HERMENEUTICS has been one of the big topics of the last 25 years. A seemingly endless series of books has been produced and academic papers written.

However, 'hermeneutics' is not only the preserve of academia. The Christian who says "I'm just a simple Bible-believer" can be just as adept at imposing an interpretation on the text as the most sophisticated theologian. Nor is 'hermeneutics' an entirely modern question. Christians have always struggled with how to read and apply the Bible, and have adopted various ways of doing so.

In fact, the history of how Christians have read and applied the Bible is most instructive, especially if we take note of what was really happening in the various historical developments. What we find repeatedly is that when people were asking 'What do we think about the Scriptures?' they were really asking 'What do we think about Christ?'. This is because what we think about the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, will run parallel with what we think about the inscripturated Word of God, the Bible.

1. Apostolic hermeneutics

The apostolic answer to the hermeneutical question is the correct one: Jesus Christ is the God-man, saviour and Lord, to whom the apostles and all the Scriptures testify. This means that the objective historical Jesus is in fact the content of the gospel message and the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16). The apostle's answer comes from taking seriously the fact that Jesus claims to be the truth. There is a sense in which the apostles understood the Old Testament as providing the substructure of the gospel - and so the Old Testament helps us understand the New Testament. But the main thrust of the New Testament is on the person of Jesus as the one who makes clear what the Old Testament is all about. So the apostle's hermeneutical position is that the gospel is the power of God for interpreting the Bible.

2. Early Christian hermeneutics

The early church was characterised by two streams, one from Alexandria and one from Antioch.

Christians at Alexandria followed Hellenistic Jews in adopting Greek ideas. Gnostic influences, which discounted the material world as inherently evil, led to a spirituality which moved God away from his historical acts. The historical events were seen as just allegorical stories and that inevitably led to the gospel being eclipsed as an historical event.

Antioch, on the other hand, emphasised the historical meaning of the Bible and so preserved the gospel as an historical event in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Out of this grew the historical method of typology which saw the Old Testament events as foreshadowing the gospel without dissolving the Old Testament's natural, historical meaning. The Antioch strand's weakness was its tendency towards the subtle heresy of Nestorius, which split Jesus' divine nature from his human nature and declared him to be not only of two natures, but also to be two persons.

A third development in the early church was interpreting the Bible in the light of ecclesiastical authority and dogma. This is a subtle problem because we all do it and, to some degree it's right that we do. We all interpret the Bible from inside our own adopted tradition and climb on the shoulders of the believers who have gone before us. The problem is when an ecclesiastical creed or confession of faith becomes the external authority by which Scripture is tested and understood. This became a bigger problem in medieval hermeneutics.

3. The struggle for an orthodox hermeneutic

The two big theological questions over which Christians struggled in the first four centuries were about the nature of God and about the person of Christ. How could God become man? And how could a man be both God and man?

By moving away from the apostolic hermeneutic of an historical Jesus, the biblical perspective on the relationship between the divine and the human, and between the eternal and the historical, was lost - both in relation to the Bible and Jesus. Without this perspective, people came up with all sorts of heresies about the nature of God and Christ, fusing or separating Jesus' divine and human natures. Ebionism (Jesus is only human), Docetism (Jesus is only divine), Apollinarianism (Jesus is divine but not fully human), and Nestorianism (Jesus is two persons, two natures), were all trying to solve the mystery by dissolving one reality to make room for another. The same happened in heresies about God. The unity of God was preserved by reducing the Son and the Spirit to beings who were less than fully God.

Eventually, in 451 AD, the Council of Chalcedon set things straight by formulating a way of speaking about Christ which didn't try to solve the mystery of how God could become man, but instead preserved it by setting the bounds of true statements. The Council decided that to keep an orthodox view you should believe that: a. Jesus is true God; b. Jesus is true man; c. the two natures are united in one person, but not fused; d. the two natures remain distinct, but are not separated. This structure of unity and distinction characterised the relationships in the Trinity. It also kept the true relationship between the divine and the human, and between the eternal and the historical, both in relation to the Bible (the hermeneutical question) and Jesus (the Christological question).

4. Medieval hermeneutics

Hermeneutics was very complex in the medieval period (500 AD-1500 AD). The influences of Antioch and Alexandria were both struggling for ascendancy and, although the search for the

natural and historical significance of the Bible was never abandoned, Alexandria won over Antioch.

This led to a complex method of interpretation being developed which didn't ignore the natural meaning, but said that the text could be read in a four-fold way - the literal sense, the moral sense, the allegorical sense and the anagogical sense (which derived heavenly meanings from the earthly text). Allegorical meaning was at the heart of this approach. Allegory comes out of fusing the historical and the eternal, and the divine and the human. They are not kept distinct, and so the basic historical meaning of the text is lost.

Related to this was the idea of the rule of faith - the accumulation of biblical doctrine - which developed into the idea that only the clergy could interpret the Bible correctly. This was really fusing the Christ of history with the body of Christ, the church, so that there was no distinction between Jesus' authority and the on-going authority of the church through its clergy. It eventually led to the doctrine of papal infallibility.

The other great hermeneutical problem is best seen in the work of Thomas Aquinas. A theological trend that had begun in the second century with Irenaeus, led to the separation of the natural and supernatural on the one hand and the fusion of the historical and the divine on the other. Catholicism, as it developed from this through to the late medieval period, came to fuse the 'Christ who is without' (the Jesus of history) with the 'Christ who is within' (that is, by the presence of his Spirit). The gospel event was redefined more and more in terms of what God does in us rather than as what God has done for us in the historic Jesus. Justification and sanctification were reversed so that a changed life became the basis of acceptance with God. Grace was redefined. It ceased to be God's attitude which makes for the justification of the ungodly, and became the spiritual influence which flows (mainly through sacraments) into the soul making it good and, eventually, acceptable to God.

5. The hermeneutics of the Reformation

Luther, and then Calvin along with the other Reformers, abandoned allegorical interpretation and went back to looking for the natural historical meaning of the Old Testament. As they did so they also recovered the historical gospel, restored justification as the basis of sanctification, and moved grace from the heart of the believer back into the heart of God.

The Reformation's hermeneutical principles came out of what the Bible said, and so the gospel returned to being the key to proper interpretation. The unity and distinction of the Old and New Testaments were clearly recognised. Exegesis became a matter of understanding the divine word as it comes to us in human dress. The Christological question "What do you think of Christ?" once more dominated in the interpretation of the Bible. If Jesus was the divine-human word incarnate, the Bible was seen as the divine-human word inscripturate. So, once again, there is unity and distinction. Even though the Bible and Jesus are distinct, they are also the same - they're both manifestations of the one Word of God.

6. Enlightenment hermeneutics

The Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries began more as a tendency to the Ebionite heresy in down-playing God's influence on humanity. Eventually it rejected God altogether. Instead of the divine and human being both united and distinct in both writing the Bible and reading the text, they were separated. So, even if the Holy Spirit existed, he had no part in writing the texts and the inspiration of Scripture became a meaningless concept. Nor could the Bible-reading believer count on the Spirit to help them understand what they were reading.

The Enlightenment led to various developments in the business of interpreting the Bible. Once the theory of interpretation was divorced from divine revelation in the Bible, working out what the Bible said came to be thought of as a matter of human scientific advances. Different philosophical perspectives, which had always dogged the question of hermeneutics, took over from biblical views of reality and knowledge (metaphysics and epistemology). Theological hermeneutics gave way to philosophical hermeneutics. Revelation by God was replaced by natural processes and independent human thought declared God to be irrelevant.

Even though the structure of unity and distinction was held in theory, in practice it was constantly attacked by a tendency to turn distinction into separation. In biblical criticism, the Enlightenment led firstly to a concentration on the history of religious thought and the history of the biblical texts. These are both legitimate dimensions of the Bible to study, but concentrating on them separated them from the Bible's theological and literary dimensions. When the new hermeneutic turned to consider the nature of the Bible texts, their theology was down-played and the author's intention ignored.

7. An evangelical approach

As evangelicals we believe in the Bible as God's word to us, but what does this mean?

a. Unlike the Alexandrian strand, we recognise the Bible as both divine and human. The great diversity of texts in the Bible find unity in their common role of testifying to Christ. We reject all tendencies to a docetic or Gnostic Bible which ignores the human context of the divine word.

b. Like the apostles, we recognise that the Old Testament finds its fullest significance in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. The relationship of the two Testaments is unity and distinction.

c. Unlike the medievalists, we avoid fusing the historic Christ with the Church as the body of Christ. So we recognise that the Church, far from being the Lord of Scripture, is created by the word and must submit to its authority.

d. While welcoming many of the insights of the Enlightenment, we reject its separation of the divine and human. We see Jesus' incarnation to be the theological reason for all proper critical study of the text and its background. Much modern literary and historical criticism assumes God has nothing to do with the text, but evangelicals refuse to separate the historical and literary dimensions of the Bible from its theological dimension. All critical procedures must be tested by the authority of Christ in his gospel.

This is only the beginning of the story, but at least we can recognize that we can't think about hermeneutics without thinking about Christ.

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The Kingdom of God and the Old Testament

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The theme of the Bible is the kingdom of God. That is where the biblical account both starts and finishes. Salvation is the means by which the sovereign God brings sinful people into that kingdom as its willing and acceptable subjects. When Jesus began His preaching, He declared that the kingdom of God was "at hand." The term "kingdom of God" is not an Old Testament one, but the concept is. Clearly, Jesus' hearers had some concept of "kingdom" which rested on their Old Testament upbringing, and they would have recognized Jesus' words as a claim that the hope or expectation of Israel was to find its fulfillment in Him.

How, then, is the kingdom of God to be seen in the Old Testament, and how does it provide the foundation for the gospel which Jesus preached? This is an important question, for there are many views current about the relationship between the Old and New Testament. Indeed, the Old Testament has provided a major problem for Christians from the Second century onward, for it was then that Marcion proposed that the Old Testament should be rejected by Christians because it revealed a very different God from the God of the New Testament. Marcion was simply expressing the problem of the Christian use and interpretation of the Old Testament, and providing a very negative solution- i.e., abandon the Old Testament.

Loss of Historical Meaning

More orthodox Christians found they could not abandon the Old Testament, for they saw everywhere in the New Testament the testimony to Jesus Christ as the fulfiller of the Old. Yet the problem of how to interpret its message in a Christian way still remained. Ever since then there have been various Marcionite moves in the church ranging from outright, considered rejection of the Old Testament to plain neglect. One move to salvage the Old Testament actually led to its wrongful use. The school of Alexandrine scholars developed the method of allegorical interpretation, which ignored the plain, historical sense of the Old Testament and read out of it a supposed hidden, Christian meaning. It was, of course, open to anyone to read out of the text anything he liked. It was really a method of reading a Christian meaning into the text. In any case, the result was a gradual loss of the historical significance of the Old Testament.

Many medieval exegetes fought against the allegorizing method, but they never succeeded in providing a satisfactory alternative. By the time of the Reformation the so-called four senses of Scripture were widely accepted. It was held that the text had four meanings: literal, allegorical, moral and eschatological. But the literal-historical sense was given scant attention, while the other senses were established more on the authority

of the church than on the basis of sound exegesis.

We should note one aspect which is no accident. The loss of the historical sense of the Old Testament went hand in hand with the medieval concept that the grace of God is primarily something done in the believer. Con-versely, the recovery of the historical sense of the Old Testament by the Reformers accompanied the recovery of the understanding of God's grace as an attitude in God towards the sinner on the basis of the historical facts of the gospel.

The fact is that a clear concept of salvation history seen as the objective acts of God for men is the enemy of inner-oriented mysticism, which not only marked the medieval church, but which also characterizes much of what passes today for Protestant evangelicalism.

The Protestant Use of the Old Testament

Most evangelicals recognize that their view of the inspiration and authority of the entire Bible has saddled them with the Old Testament whether they like it or not. As a result, we see a variety of solutions to the problem of the relationship of the two Testaments. Two broad errors should be carefully avoided:

1. Many people simply draw on the great variety of Old Testament narrative for its wealth of human story. The aim is to illustrate how God deals with in-dividuals, the godly and the ungodly. The result is a moralizing application that does little more than point up examples for us to follow and examples for us to eschew. Because there is no sense of structure and dynamic development, each narrative or text is treated in isolation from the wider framework of God's progres-sive revelation. Consequently, the relationship of Old to New involves little more than illustrations of gospel truth.

2. Another popular error is that of dispensational-ism. Dispensationalism, to its credit, treats the Old Testament very seriously. However, it views the Old Testament as a totally different dispensation (in fact, a series of dispensations) from the New. God acts for man's salvation in the Old Testament in a way quite different from the way He acts in the gospel of the New Testament. With regard to Israel's history and prophecy, God is seen acting exclusively for Israel in a way which is unrelated to the gospel. For the Christian, then, the Old Testament is of interest only in so far as it prophesies of the future events relating to Israel. By applying a rule of interpretation which appears to guard the in-tegrity of Scripture but which in fact is not itself drawn from Scripture, dispensational ism confines prophetic fulfillment to the future of Israel as a nation and severs Israel's history from any significant relationship to the gospel. In order to make the historical narrative relevant to Christians, it then constructs an elaborate and un-controlled typological interpretation of the historical significance of the Old Testament and its essential unity with the New Testament.

When Luther asserted the importance of a literal reading of the Old Testament, he did not mean (as dispensationalists mean) that it is read apart from the New Testament. For

Luther, the literal meaning involved both the word of the old covenant promises and the fulfillment of this as it is found in Jesus Christ. Calvin taught the unity of the covenants, pointing out that what was promised in the old covenant had its substance in Christ (see Calvin's commentary on 2 Corinthians 1:20).

The Unifying Theme of the Kingdom of God

Now let us examine the theme of the kingdom of God on the basis of the fact that we can discern its reality everywhere in Scripture. The kingdom of God involves three essential aspects: 1. The subjects of that rule, who are the people of God 2. The sphere of that rule, which is the place where God is the unchallenged Lord among his people 3. The ruling relationship by which God establishes the nature of His kingdom and its subjects according to His own eternal and unchanging character.

We may summarize these elements by saying that we see in the Bible the concept of the kingdom of God as involving: God's people, in God's place, under God's rule.

The Kingdom in Eden

The first manifestation of the sovereign rule of God is the creation. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of creation, for it establishes the foundation for all our understanding of reality. It establishes once and for all the sovereignty of God and the fact that things are what they are because God made them so. The climax of God's creation was the establishment of the kind of kingdom that we are now considering. In Eden God set His people-Adam and Eve, made in His image and reflecting His rule-in their own dominion over the rest of the created order (Gen. 1 :26). God's own rule was epitomized in the probationary word which set the bounds of human freedom within the kingdom (Gen. 2:15-17). The blessedness of kingdom existence consisted in both the relationship of man to God and the relationship of man to the creation. Nature was submissive to man's dominion and fruitful in providing his needs. Salvation, of course, had no place in this prototype kingdom since man was made in the kingdom and needed no saving.

The Kingdom in Israel's History

The fall of man (Gen. 3) caused a disruption in his kingdom existence. As a rebel against God, he was no longer a willing subject and had to suffer ejection from the garden. As man fell, the creation was made to fall with him. The ground was cursed, nature challenged man's dominion, and all of man's existence was now outside the garden. But judgment and grace go hand in hand. God declared His purpose to reverse the fall by means of the woman's seed (Gen. 3:15). Genesis 4 to 11 shows two lines of human development-one ungodly line expressing human sin and inviting God's judgment, and a godly line showing God's purpose of grace to make a people for Himself. The godly line leads us to Abraham, to whom the significant covenant promises were made. These promises have three focal points:

1. God will make of Abraham's descendants a great nation.
2. They will be given a land to dwell in.
3. They will be established on a special relationship to God.

Here we see nothing less than the promise of the kingdom of God. Abraham's descendants are to be God's people, in God's place, under God's rule.

The rest of Genesis shows the tension between the promise and the actual experience of the patriarchs. Everything seemed to work against the fulfillment of the promises, so that only God's word of promise was left to be embraced by faith. The ultimate reversal was seen when the descendants of Jacob ended up in Egypt, where they suffered a cruel bondage.

The relationship of the covenant to Abraham and to the salvation of Israel from Egypt is clearly seen in Exodus 2:23, 24: " . . . their cry under bondage came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" RSV. We cannot comment here on every detail of the great exodus from Egypt, but we should note its main features, for they form the pattern of salvation in the Bible.

As to the cause of salvation, we see that it is grace alone. It is on the basis of God's gracious promise to Abraham and not on the basis of any merit in Israel that God works salvation. Next we note the function of Egypt and Pharaoh to demonstrate a real bondage as that from which salvation is a release. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart makes it doubly clear that Israel is not able of her own will to break free from this bondage, but must comply with the command, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will work for you today. . . ." Ex. 14:13, RSV. When we add to this the miracles of the plagues and the opening of the sea, followed by the miracle of Israel's preservation in the desert, we can see why Israel ever after praised God by recounting His mighty acts in history by which He saved them (e.g., see Ex. 15; Deut. 6:20-24; 26:5--10; Josh. 24:5-13; Ps, 78; 105; 106; 114; 135; 136; Neh. 9:9-15).

When God gave His covenant stipulations at Sinai, He addressed Israel as His people. It is clear that this law of Moses is not a program of works for salvation. Salvation is of grace, and the covenant of Sinai was given, not so that Israel might be saved, but because she was saved. The law is thus a manifesto for the people of the kingdom.

Again, space is too short to detail the whole range of Israel's history, but we can easily observe the emerg-ing pattern:

1. The promise of the kingdom was given to Abraham.
2. The acts of God in bringing Israel out of Egypt were the definitive acts of salvation.
3. Sinai marked the objective constitution of Israel as the people of God.
4. Salvation as the way into the kingdom also involved the bringing of Israel into possession of Canaan. The pattern of conquest under Joshua continued the demonstration of the fact that it was the power of God at work in salvation.
5. The political development leading through the period of the judges to the establishment of the united monarchy was a demonstration (albeit imperfect) of

the principle of a theocracy—a God-ruled state. 6. The rule of God in Israel was mediated through the Sinai covenant as it was administered by God's anointed, King David and his lineage, and as the focal point of this administration was established in relationship to the temple in Jerusalem.

Once again we see a clear expression of the kingdom of God answering to the promises to Abraham and exhibiting the basic characteristics of God's people, in God's place, under God's rule. But history will not permit us to oversimplify the situation, for the decline and fall of Israel between 922 B.C. and 586 B.C. raises the very important question about the nature of the fulfillment that existed under David and Solomon. In certain ways the physical characteristics of the promises to Abraham were fulfilled:

Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land which He swore to give to their fathers. . . . Not one of all the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.—Josh. 21:43,45, RSV.

And Judah and Israel dwelt in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon.—1 Kings 4:25, RSV.

We can see in the latter reference the same reflection of the Eden paradise model of the kingdom that also figures in the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey (cf. Deut. 8:7-10). Eden will continue to be reflected in the promises of God, but any fulfillment in the present world order remains part of the fallen world, which is outside Eden. That is why the ultimate fulfillment of the promises to Abraham and of all prophecy of the kingdom of God will be apart from the present state of creation's fallenness.

So, while the kingdom of David and Solomon was a glorious fulfillment of the promises, it was nevertheless a kingdom of fallen people in a fallen world. It never could be permanent in itself, for it was imperfect. But when this kingdom fell apart, the question of the real fulfillment of the promises was a problem. The answer was given by the prophets of Israel, whose principal function was to interpret the decline as God's judgment on transgression of the covenant and to reaffirm the faithfulness of God by pointing to a great future day when all would be restored and made perfect, permanent and glorious.

The Kingdom in Prophecy

The obvious characteristic of futuristic prophecy is that it describes the future in terms which are drawn from the pattern of past history. When God moves for the final salvation of His people, it will be a repetition of the events from the time of bondage to the setting up of the theocratic state in the promised land. Their exile is a second bondage, salvation a second exodus. A second way through the wilderness will lead to a second possession of the land. The city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt and also the temple, and the Davidic king will once again rule God's people.

All this is not mere repetition, for there is a spirit-ualizing, or supernaturalizing, of the whole process. The exodus salvation in prophecy involves forgiveness of sins, and the covenant will be written on the heart. Human nature will be changed to conform perfectly with God's law. The land will perfectly reflect Eden by its fruitfulness, and nature will no longer be at odds with itself and with man. In fact, the renewal will be a remaking of the very sky and the earth. Sometimes the prophets deliberately mixed the restored Israel theme with the restored Eden theme (Ezek. 36:35; Isa. 51 :3). So Ezekiel depicts the river of life flowing from the new temple and flanked by the tree of life (Ezek. 47:3-12; cf. Rev. 22:1, 2).

Now the crucial question is: when is all this fulfilled? Clearly, the historical restoration from Babylon was not the anticipated fulfillment. It did provide a very pale reflection of fulfillment in that all the physical features were there to some degree. But the restoration that we read of in Ezra and Nehemiah, far from out-shining the glories of David and Solomon's day, did not even come near to equaling them. In the face of this disappointment, the post-exilic prophets (Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi) point still to that future great day of the Lord.

The Kingdom in the New Testament

While the New Testament provides a more diversified description of the kingdom and concentrates on its reality in the spiritual plane, the same basic structure of the kingdom is there as is in the Old Testament. Because of the spiritual emphasis of the New Testament, some Christians (notably, dispensationalists) have suggested that the kingdom of the New Testament is not the one promised in the Old Testament. We must allow the testimony of Jesus and the apostles to decide that question for us. It is our firm conviction that the New Testament gospel kingdom is proclaimed everywhere as the fulfillment of the Old Testament expectations.

1. God's People. We have seen that this theme begins with Adam, not Israel. Theologically, Adam in Eden corresponds with Israel in the promised land. But to what do these elements correspond in the New Testament? Adam is the son of God (Luke 3:38). Israel is the people of God: ". . . I . . . will be your God, and you shall be My people." Lev. 26:12, RSV. This covenant formula is individualized in the king, the representative of Israel: "I will be his father, and he shall be My son." 2 Sam. 7:14, RSV. Israel is also spoken of as God's son: ". . . out of Egypt I called My son." Hosea 11:1, RSV. The genealogy of Luke 3 makes it quite clear that Jesus is the true Son of Adam, and this accords with the use of the title "Son of Adam" in the Gospels. Jesus is the "beloved Son" with whom God is pleased (Luke 3:22). Indeed, Luke follows this baptismal declaration with his genealogy showing that through Adam, Jesus is the Son of God.

Jesus is looked upon as both the ideal Adam and the ideal Israel—that is, He is the people of God, the Seed of Abraham to whom all promises were made (see Gal. 3:16). Jesus as the Son of Adam (Son of man) accomplishes that which Adam failed to do; and likewise, as the true Israel, He does what Israel failed to do. Thus the temptation narratives show the reversal of Satan's conquest of Adam in the garden and of Israel in

the wilderness.

If Jesus is the true people of God, the true Adam and the true Israel, all the prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel to be the people of God must have their fulfillment in Him. So Paul, preaching the gospel of Christ, was addressing himself to the hope of Israel (Acts 26:6, 7; 28:20). The consistent testimony of the apostle is to Christ as fulfiller (see 2 Cor. 1 :20). We may not seek the true Israel outside of Christ or look for her restoration apart from the gospel. To become one of the people of God, one must be incorporated into Christ by faith (John 1 :12; 2 Cor. 5:17; etc.).

2. God's Place. Israel's hope was to return to Zion, the place of God's dwelling among His people. The New Testament must tell us where Zion is if we would discover the new temple and the ruling son of David. Because Jesus is the Son of David to whom rule is given, Zion is where He is-Le., in heaven. The kingdom of God cannot be separated from the presence of Jesus (Heb. 12:22).

In thinking of God's place, it is important not to be too conditioned by our earthly concepts of real estate. The prominence in the Old Testament of the promised land should not be allowed to establish our concept of God's place. We must remember that the promised land, Canaan, is an earthly expression of a reality which we saw set forth in the garden of Eden. But even Eden could not be Eden without the presence of God. Let Levi teach us a lesson. The tribe of Levi was chosen to be priestly representatives of Israel in having access to God (a priest is one who has access to God). God told Moses that He intended to make a nation of priests (Ex. 19:6), a truth which has its fulfillment in the priesthood of all believers. In this sense Levi was privileged to represent God's people in the ideal relationship of being accepted into God's presence. All the tribes were apportioned real estate as their inheritance, except Levi. Levi, the truly representative Israel, was given a far greater gift: "They shall have no inheritance among their brethren; the Lord is their inheritance. . . ." Deut. 18:2, RSV.

The making of the true kingdom of priests comes through the preaching of the gospel. The ultimate inheritance is related to priesthood rather than land rights. And it is this priesthood that the New Testament applies to Christians, for they have access to the presence of God through Jesus Christ. Because the hope of Israel leads thus to the blessings of the gospel, the writer to the Hebrews describes Abraham's faith in terms of its ultimate conclusion. It is not to the land of Canaan that Abraham's faith leads, but to the heavenly homeland (Heb. 11 :13-16).

3. God's Rule. The concept of a theocracy established in the choice of a people as God's people and in the covenant regulation of this people, found its developed expression in the monarchy. The ruling of God's anointed king joined with the temple to provide an expression in Israel of these basic kingdom ideas. When God "walked" in the garden of Eden, there was no need of a symbol of His presence. But in the fallen world where sin separates man from God, a tangible symbol was provided. The tabernacle was given to symbolize at the one time both the presence of God among the people and the separation between a holy God and a sinful people.

Solomon's temple became a fixed symbol of God's dwelling and rule until it was destroyed in 586 B.C. Prophecy established the hope in the restored temple as the center of God's rule in Zion.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, Old Testament prophecy about the rule of God and the temple is fulfilled in the gospel. The resurrection of Jesus is not only the restoration of the temple (John 2:19-22), but also the re-enthronement of the Davidic king (Acts 2:30,31). The true temple is in heaven, where Jesus reigns now (Acts 2:33, 36; Heb. 8:1, 2). While believers are separated from their Lord (they are on earth, He is in heaven), there is another temple created by the Holy Spirit, who unites believers with the ascended Lord (2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:4-8).

The New Testament develops Stephen's assertion that God's temple is not made with hands (Acts 7:47-50). It is, in fact, the heavenly dwelling to which temple prophecy ultimately points, and there the Eden typology is answered in the face-to-face relationship which requires no symbolic temple, for God is the temple (Rev. 21 :22).

Some Conclusions

All the biblical promises find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Every element of the Old Testament's unfolding revelation of the kingdom leads to the Person of Jesus Christ come in the flesh. The kingdom of God has its objective reality in Him. He is God's true people. His presence marks the presence of God in the place we designate His kingdom. His word comes as God's ruling word with all authority.

The New Testament, in declaring the kingdom "at hand" with the coming of Jesus, points us to the fact that there is yet a consummation. But this consummation, such as is described in Revelation 21 and 22, is the outcome of the definitive work of Christ in the flesh, His living and dying. The great victory over the dragon of the Revelation is essentially the victory won two thousand years ago for us in the Person of Jesus Christ. To understand the gospel-Christ's life and death and resurrection for us-is to understand eschatology. The gospel, and it alone, is the key to those events which the Revelation describes as part of the process of bringing about the consummation of the kingdom. In the book of Revelation no new principle, no new aspect of the kingdom of God, is dealt with which is not already established on the basis of the gospel. The second coming of Christ and the whole of biblical eschatology involves the consummation of the gospel. The first coming of Christ determines the nature of events at His second coming.

In looking at the theme of the kingdom of God in the Old and New Testament, we have done little more than establish a framework necessary to understand the Old Testament basis of the gospel. Most importantly, this framework establishes the objective, historical nature of the gospel and rescues us from subjective caricatures of the gospel. Since all the promises and hopes of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ, we recognize that the righteousness of God is fulfilled in Him. The reading

of the entire Bible as a coherent and unified revelation forces us to acknowledge that the righteousness we need for acceptance with God is outside of us in the Person of God's Christ.

Recurring Biblical-theological issues in OT studies

Dr Jack Collins

A number of issues come up again and again as we try to give a sound theological exposition of the Old Testament. My goal is to set out the framework in which I understand these issues, so you can see how that framework applies. I encourage you to take these thoughts further as you wrestle with the texts on your own.

1 The covenant: An internal reality embraced in the heart

The covenants we find in the Bible all come with their outward administrative rites – circumcision, public worship, and so on. And it is possible for someone to be a member of the covenant people in an outward way only, to lack a genuine living faith: and this is a situation that God abhors.

This is clear in Romans 2:27-28:

²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Here (as elsewhere in Paul – e.g. 2 Cor 3:6, where this is the key to what Paul means by “old” and “new” covenants) the “letter” speaks of the covenant as an outward thing only, while “Spirit” describes the covenant embraced in the heart (the result of the Spirit’s work).¹

This is a theme that runs through the Bible, both in what we call the OT and the NT. For example, consider Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25-26, all about “circumcision of the heart.” See also Isa 29:13 (cited in Matt 15:8-9) on the distinction between drawing near to God with one’s lips only while the heart is far from him (i.e. true covenant life means that public worship must engage the inner man); and Isa 1:10-20 is a longer text that hammers away at this very point. Likewise, Psalm 50 covers the same point in a hymn.

This idea comes across in the basic confession of Old Testament faith, Exodus 34:6-7:

⁶The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

You can see from the context that those who receive God’s steadfast love and faithfulness are the truly penitent – those for whom the covenant of grace is an inward reality – while “the guilty” (words not actually in the Hebrew) are those who don’t.

This is just what we find in the NT, too. For example, Hebrews 3:12-19 warns its readers not to fail as the generation that left Egypt did, by having “an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” – just as so many of that earlier lot had. Similarly, in 4:2 the idea is explicit: “For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.”

¹ It is indeed surprising that Schreiner’s commentary misses the plain statement of Paul here: “outward-inward” corresponds to “letter-Spirit.”

The letter of 1 John is peppered with such concerns, e.g. 1:6-7:

⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

Similarly, 2:4-5 (and many others):

⁴ Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵ but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.

It is not the outward claim, or the ordinances of the covenant, that make one a true partaker of the covenant’s promises – but a living faith expressing itself in love and obedience.

None of this makes the outward covenant rites irrelevant – instead it points to what those rites aim at.

2 Continuity and discontinuity in eras of redemptive history

The Biblical authors are clear that at all eras of redemptive history, the only way a covenant member is right with God is through imputed righteousness, received by faith: this is Paul’s theme in Rom 4, where he cites Abraham (Gen 15:6) and David (Ps 32:1) as his exemplars. The author of Hebrews did not doubt whether the OT people had received the gospel; he says in 4:2 that it came to us just as it did to them. (How different from what we have to say! We usually have to clarify that it came to them just as it did to us!) This is why he can use OT saints as exemplars of the faith we are called to have in Heb 11. Hence whatever differences we may think we find from one redemptive era to the next, it cannot be in the way of being right. The following points will help us to think clearly about our relationship to the covenant people of old.

(1) God’s purpose of redemption for his now sin-stained creatures is first set out in Gen 3:15. When God called Abraham to be his covenant partner, it was explicit in the call that this was for the sake of the whole world (Gen 12:2-3).

(2) What distinguishes the Mosaic covenant from the rest is its focus on setting up Israel as a church-state, to further God’s redemptive purpose (Exod 19:5-6; Deut 4:5-8). In this situation, citizenship in Israel and membership in the covenant people are the same thing. Israel’s loyalty to the Lord – and the Lord’s chastisement of his people – will be for the instruction of the Gentile world (1 Kings 8:57-61; Deut 29:24-28).

(3) Although individual Gentiles could and did attach themselves to the Lord throughout the OT period (as proselytes and sojourners), the OT looks forward to the large-scale enfolding of the Gentiles into God’s covenant people at some in the future. For example, Psalm 96:3; 98:3 speak of declaring God’s glory among the Gentiles; while Isa 2:1-5 looks to the Gentiles streaming to Jerusalem for instruction. This is especially the work of the Messiah, as in Psalm 2:8; 72:8-11; Isa 9:7; 11:1-10 – and typically the image is of the Messiah as the conqueror who brings the Gentiles into his empire.

(4) Paul looked at his own apostolate as part of the fulfilling of these passages, as he cites a sampling of them in Rom 15:9-12. (That tells you that the fulfillment does not await Christ’s return.) In Rom 11:11-24 he speaks of the purpose of the Gentile mission as grafting the Gentiles into the stock of Israel – that is, they do not *replace* Israel, nor are

they a *new* covenant people, but they become participants in the one plan of grace by their ingrafting. Note: this explains what the mystery of the gospel was in Ephesians 3:6-7, namely that the Gentiles would be full “citizens” rather than “strangers and sojourners” (Eph 2:19, using terms from the Pentateuch).

(5) Hence Israel’s history is *our* salvation history, for instruction, example, and warning (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:1-12).

(6) This points the way to the kinds of *discontinuity* we may expect to find between the Gentile era and the old era. These will generally be of two types:

a. *Those features that have to do with looking forward and looking back.* The Messiah has now come, he has offered his sacrifice, and he is now on his throne ruling and conquering. Hence, for example, we are not concerned with David’s physical dynasty; our sacraments look back rather than forward.

b. *Those features related to the national and ethnic distinctiveness of the covenant people.* Lev 20:22-26, for example, tells us that many of the OT laws (such as clean and unclean distinctions) had to do with distinguishing Israel as the covenant people. In our era, such laws are done away with – interestingly enough, in the context of the doing away with the ethnic distinctiveness of the covenant people (Acts 10:10-16, 28). Likewise, the church-state nexus is dissolved, and physical Jerusalem is no longer our capital.

3 The role of Law in the covenant

The “law” (*tôrâ*) of God in the Old Testament is his instruction for his covenant people – it reveals his grace and his expectations for those he loves. But the instruction given to Moses includes all manner of requirements and regulations, covering matters of civil and criminal actions, personal cleanliness, ritual, and so on. How does this relate to the grace and love of God – and what does the “freedom” we find in the NT say about it?

The first thing we have to do is to distinguish between the different kinds of regulations we find in the OT. The way we do that is to remember the purpose of this covenant legislation, namely, to establish Israel as a church-state.²

For example, there are civil and criminal regulations whose purpose is to preserve the level of civil goodness necessary for maintaining a just society. Human courts can judge these cases and administer punishments to offenders. The actual ethical expectations are often much higher and deeper than the civil requirement; they are matters of the heart. A good example of this would be the divorce law in Deut 24:1-4, about which the Pharisees questioned Jesus in Matt 19:3-9. Jesus explains that this law does not express the Creator’s will for marriage, but that Gen 1:27; 2:24 does. The Pharisees had erred in using the Deut text for a purpose that God did not intend it for, as if it could override the creational pattern described in Genesis. Now the specific laws certainly have an ethical foundation, and they guard equity, protect the weak from the strong, and even require charity (e.g. gleaning laws); but they do not express the full depth of what God has

² Many of the ideas in this section are based on Christopher Wright’s *An Eye for an Eye* (Inter-Varsity, 1983), 148-173. See also Gordon Wenham’s “The gap between law and ethics in the Bible,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 48:1 (1997), 17-29.

intended his people to be.³ When Jesus spoke of the weightier matters of the law” (Matt 23:23), I think he was touching on this topic. These civil laws teach us by showing how equity applied in a specific redemptive-historical setting.

Again, as I have already indicated, there are some rules whose purpose is to set Israel apart from the Gentiles as God’s own special possession. Lev 20:22-26 use a play on the word “separate”: The Lord has “separated” them from among all the peoples, and they should “separate” between the clean and the unclean foods. (These rules also express God’s ownership of his creation, since they acknowledge his right to tell his people how to use what he created; and they also provide a useful metaphorical sense of “clean/unclean” as a moral phenomenon.)

Further, there are laws concerning the rituals, offerings, and priesthood. I do not think that to say that the NT “abrogated” them quite captures what we want; it’s better to say that the principles that underlie them apply differently due to the redemptive-historical changes of our era. Indeed, I think that the author of Hebrews would tell us that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (10:4) – which I take to imply that such was never the actual purpose of the sacrifices. That is, they certainly use the language and symbolism of substitutionary atonement, but I think that they do so in a sacramental way. (That is why the OT language, especially concerning the peace/fellowship offering, lies behind NT discussion of the Lord’s Supper.) Likewise, it seems to me likely that the priesthood has been transmuted into the pastoral ministry of our era – stripped of its restriction to one tribe of Israel. (The common idea that the NT *introduces* the “priesthood of all believers” comes from a misinterpretation of 1 Pet 2:9 – which is actually using Exod 19:5-6, a description of Israel! The best way to understand this is to see that there are different levels of priesthood: priests who minister to the worshiping people of God, and the people of God who minister to the world at large. Since ancient Israel had both kinds, there’s no reason we can’t as well.) Our task, then, is to find the principles behind the regulations and see how they apply in our day.⁴

At the same time we find a profound moral code running through the law of God, such as the Ten Commandments and much of Lev 19; and it is impossible for this moral code to change because it expresses the very holiness and love of God.

Christians are accustomed to taking a negative view of the OT law because of the way they have read certain polemical passages in Paul – but this fails to take into account the range of laws in the OT, as well as the argumentative situations that faced Paul. Or else they respond to descriptions of the godly devotee of the law such as Psalm 1 by reading it as a description of Jesus the perfect law-keeper. What they are missing is that the reason they read it this way is that the only category they have for “law” is that of *merit*: you obey the law in order to earn something. But this is foreign to the OT’s own presentation of the law: the law is instead the rule of life for you who have come into the covenant; it is the description of what it means to love God and your neighbor; it is the path you walk as God cleanses and heals your inner filth; it describes the beauty that God intends to achieve within you, his beloved, as you submit to him. God loves his people far too much to leave them in their defilement.

³ Take, for example, Boaz in the book of Ruth: what makes him so attractive is the way he goes well beyond the legal requirement of allowing Ruth to glean – on which see Collins, “Ambiguity and theology in Ruth: Ruth 1.21 and 2.20”, *Presbyterion* 19:2 (Fall 1993), 97-102.

⁴ For a good example, see Jay Budziszewski, “Right back on the hook,” in the web-zine *Boundless* <http://www.boundless.org/departments/theophilus/a0000463.html>.

If we look at it this way, we can begin to love and adore the law in all its unrelenting demand: because we desire to walk with God, and this describes what walking with God is and what it will lead to. (To borrow from C.S. Lewis, if we want to walk with God without obeying his law, what we really want is to walk with God without walking with God: and that cannot happen.⁵) The law is every bit as much rooted in God's love as are his promises, and we in the Gentile era are not loved less than those of old.

4 Corporate versus individual

The covenant people is a corporate concept: it is a body composed of many members. (That should sound like Paul's description of the Church.) "Israel" is a corporate entity. Much of what we find in the OT addresses the overall spiritual condition of the corporate entity, and we had better be clear about that. For example, Judges is mostly about God's dealing with his people – who were mostly faithless with bright bursts of faithful leadership – and not about how God deals with individuals. (I said, *mostly*: you can still learn from the examples of these judges.)

That's hard for Western Christians to grasp: we are used to thinking in terms of our lives as individuals.

But we must not put the matter as an either-or: it should be both-and. You have misread Ephesians if you don't come away from it believing that the great blessing for which God chose each member of his people is their participation in the life of the Church, for the sake of which Christ rules all things. It is the Church that Christ has as his bride. So our chief good is for the Church to reach the full measure of spiritual life and vitality. On the other hand, it takes individuals committed to personal, family, and congregational holiness for such to come about. This means that we have to keep these two emphases in constant tension.

At the same time, we have to keep track of whether a given passage is about the individual or the corporate entity. For example, the Lord may threaten destruction and judgment for the body because it is riddled with incurable unfaithfulness. But that does not mean that pious individuals will also be condemned – though they may have to endure heart-rending hardship, as we see in Lamentations. At the same time, God may remove specific individuals from his people because they are the cross that keep the people from being pure and vibrant.

Likewise, God promises spiritual prosperity for his people; but whether any individual will benefit from it depends on whether his own faith is genuine.

5 Conditionality

One of the greatest barriers to clear thought is the failure to ask whether a particular question makes sense. We often ask whether the grace of God is conditional or unconditional. What we fail to ask is "conditional with respect to what?" In this way we can say that the grace of God and the blessings of his covenant are unconditional *with respect to merit* – that is, they come to undeserving sinners to forgive and restore them to their full humanity.

⁵ See *Mere Christianity*, ii:4.

On the other hand, we can see that these blessings are conditional *with respect to instrumentality* – that is, you have to exercise faith to receive them. Paul told the Philippian jailor to believe in the Lord Jesus: had the man not believed, then no amount of predestination before the foundation of the world would have bestowed the blessings of God upon him. Likewise, covenantal obedience and perseverance are part of the instrumental conditions for our receiving God’s blessings at the final judgment (which is why the NT often calls believers “those who *are being* saved,” and why the verb “save” is often in the future).

Similarly, when we deal with conditional and unconditional prophecy, and want to relate it to God’s sovereignty, we must decide with respect to what is the conditionality we are speaking of. From God’s side, there is no contingency, since he’s working out everything according to his perfect plan. From our side, however, the whole show is loaded with contingency. We must not mix these two levels of description; in fact, together they make up a tension that we just have to live with. (I know it’s an irresolvable tension because of what happens if you try to resolve it: disaster, either by hyper-Calvinism or by openness theism. Don’t bother asking which is worse: either way you’re just as dead.)