

Greidanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ From the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999. (373 pp.)

Preaching Christ from the Old Testament (PCOT) is fascinating reading but most certainly not for the faint of heart! Sidney Greidanus, professor of preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, has made a significant contribution to an age old discussion related to how Christ should be preached from the Old Testament, given that one agrees with the importance of preaching the Old Testament to people living in this dispensation. Admittedly, Greidanus explicitly identifies his target audience as seminary students and preachers (who most likely have been through seminary), but nonetheless, a careful and interested reader without seminary training can and will gain much profit from this work.

Purpose and Intent

Greidanus' immediate purpose for writing *PCOT* was to produce a textbook for a course he taught on preaching Christ from the Old Testament. However, on a broader scope, his stated aim was "to provide seminary students and preachers with a responsible, contemporary method for preaching Christ from the Old Testament." (p. xii)

Additionally, he intended *PCOT* to "challenge Old Testament scholars to broaden their focus and to understand the Old Testament not only in its own historical context but also in the context of the New Testament." (p. xii) Some 350 pages later, Greidanus has helped his reader to understand both the importance of preaching Christ and preaching Him from the Old Testament to a New Testament Church. Furthermore, he has not merely heightened awareness of the need to preach Christ from the Old Testament; in

PCOT Greidanus has provided both a model and a methodology, even if somewhat complex, to help preachers accomplish this worthy and necessary objective.

Structure and Content

The sheer size of the task Greidanus assumed in writing on this topic is daunting. How does one go about addressing this topic? What questions must guide the discussion and which ones can be set aside as secondary? What does one do when there is no agreement even among evangelicals regarding the place the Old Testament should occupy in contemporary preaching, not to mention the different schools of thought as to how it should be preached assuming one concludes it should be preached? How should the history behind these matters affect the present discussion? Perhaps *PCOT*'s greatest strength lies in the structure and organization of the material Greidanus presents.

Although by nature the material is weighty and at times even unwieldy, his simple organizational scheme keeps the reader on track and focused on the big picture without getting lost in the forest as one looks at the different trees along the way. His first two chapters lay an important foundation that Greidanus does not take for granted in his reader—that Christ should be preached, that the Old Testament should be preached, and therefore, that Christ should be preached from the Old Testament. After demonstrating that preaching Christ was the heart of the apostolic message, Greidanus clarifies what preaching Christ means and why it is important that He be preached.

Preaching Christ is not, of course, merely mentioning the name of Jesus or Christ in the sermon. It is not identifying Christ with Yahweh in the Old Testament, or the Angel of Yahweh, or the Commander of the Lord's army, or the Wisdom of God. It is not simply pointing to Christ from a distance or "drawing lines to Christ" by way of typology. . . .to preach Christ is to proclaim some facet of the person, work, or teaching of Jesus of Nazareth so that people may believe him, trust him, love him, and obey him." (p. 8)

After demonstrating the importance and value of preaching Christ, Greidanus establishes the same for preaching the Old Testament in this dispensation. His section explaining the appalling lack of preaching from the Old Testament presents the historical development of the problem as well as common difficulties that confront the preacher when preaching from the Old Testament. However, he lays out compelling reasons that contemporary preachers should recommit to preaching the Old Testament.

Having established both the importance of preaching Christ and the value and necessity of preaching from the Old Testament, in the second chapter Greidanus introduces his main idea, namely that Christ must be accurately preached from the Old Testament. After acknowledging the idea of preaching Christ from the Old Testament seems self-evident, he addresses common reasons preachers neglect to preach Christ from the Old Testament or do so inadequately and concludes with a strong motivation for such preaching in the Church.

There are probably many reasons for the lack of preaching Christ from the Old Testament, ranging from the difficulty of doing so to a lack of interest. We shall analyze three sets of possible reasons: (1) the temptation of human-centered preaching, (2) the concern about forced interpretation, and (3) the separation of the Old Testament from the New. (pp. 33-34)

But in addition to this benefit of preaching Christ, we can discern others which arise specifically from preaching Christ from the Old Testament. We shall note two such benefits: acquainting people with the Old Testament and providing them a fuller understanding of Christ. (p. 62)

In the following two chapters Greidanus presents the history of preaching Christ through the Old Testament throughout the Church age. The first of the two chapters presents a survey of how Christ was preached from the Old Testament starting with the early church up to the Reformation. The second chapter of this pair presents a fairly thorough analysis (including explanation, strengths, and weaknesses) of the individual

approaches to preaching Christ in the Old Testament adopted by Luther, Calvin, Spurgeon and Wilhelm Vischer.

In the fifth chapter Greidanus introduces key New Testament principles necessary for preaching Christ accurately from the Old Testament. A primary concern in this section is his warning to avoid preaching Christ apart from God and His acts. This danger may be avoided by consciously remembering that Christ was “sent by God, accomplished the work of God, and sought the glory of God.” (p. 178-179) A second error mentioned is that of preaching the Old Testament without relating it to God’s ultimate revelation of Himself in Christ. Greidanus’ corrective is to “move from Christ as we know him from the New Testament to the Old Testament.” (p. 183). In the opinion of this reviewer, this runs too great a risk of reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament; a danger which Greidanus acknowledges and then dismisses by observing, “I soon realized that I was in good company because this is precisely the way the apostles and the Gospel writers preached Christ from the Old Testament: they started from the reality of Jesus Christ.” (p. 183) What Greidanus fails to address is that while they may have written from the stand point of a New Testament presentation of Christ, they were not starting there and working backwards. They were writing from a well established backdrop of information about Christ drawn from the Old Testament. This is significantly different than starting with the New Testament information as square one and moving back from there to the Old Testament and interpreting it in light of this new revelation. There was already a great deal of information (both text and interpretation) about Christ/Messiah from the Old Testament with which these men would certainly have been intimately acquainted, and which would have served as the crucible and the context

for much of what they wrote in the New Testament. In the opinion of this reviewer, Greidanus has failed to make his case on this point. The final section of this chapter introduces and briefly evaluates different aspects of the Christo-centric method which he formally develops in chapter 6 as the proposed method for preaching Christ from the Old Testament. This method views the “whole counsel of God, with all its teachings, laws, prophecies, and visions, in the light of Jesus Christ.” (p. 228) Greidanus clarifies the first step in eight step process as understanding the Old Testament text in its historical and grammatical context before moving on to seeing how its message connects and progresses with the rest of redemptive history, but the primary point is to see how this immediate message is viewed in relationship to the ultimate and complete message of Christ as we know it to be from the whole of Scripture. In this light, “redemptive-historical progression is the foundational way of preaching Christ from the Old Testament.” (p. 234). By this Greidanus means that in all of the Old Testament, the reader is impacted by the fact that God is acting and moving, and that His action/movement climaxes in the coming of Christ. The coming of Christ is the theological center of God’s redemptive action in human history. From that point one looks back and understands the past and the future in light of what is – Christ. For the Old Testament, this means the preacher must identify the immediate message of the moment for Israel, the chronological message of the passage in terms of where it fits in the unfolding progression toward Christ’s coming, and the theological implications of that passage when viewed in light of the whole story – a Christ who has come.

The step of redemptive-historical progression, is linked to a second step of preaching Christ from the Old Testament – the way of promise-fulfillment. The specific

point of connection linking the two is Greidanus' contention that God's promises tend to be fulfilled progressively. (p. 242) He distinguishes his view from that of those who argue for a double fulfillment of a prophetic text by arguing that a prophecy is capable of being filled up by various events until it reaches fullness and then it is to be viewed as fulfilled. To support/explain his view he cites William LaSor's argument that biblical prophecy is more than mere prediction of a future event.

Prophecy, in the sense that it reveals some part of God's redemptive purpose, is capable of being filled, of achieving fullness, so that when it is filled full it is fulfilled. If we understand prophecy in this sense, we no longer ask the question, "Is prophecy capable of more than one fulfillment?" It is capable of more and more filling until it is entirely fulfilled. (p. 242)

In the opinion of this reviewer, simply citing LaSor's statement may help Greidanus clarify his view, but it falls short of substantiating or validating that view. In this instance, he seems to assume this citation settles the question regarding double fulfillment for the reader. In at least this case, not only was the question not answered, but additional questions were raised.

The third and fourth steps in this process relate typology and analogy to preaching Christ from the Old Testament. While using these somewhat loaded terms, Greidanus is careful to qualify his use of them so as to avoid some of the common excesses employed by careless or untaught preachers.

The final three steps in this method relate primarily to how God's revelation unfolded and was presented in each stage of redemptive history. These steps are longitudinal themes, New Testament references, and contrast.

In the final two chapters (7 and 8) Greidanus applies his methodology in two particular directions. In chapter 7, he guides the reader through a series of 10 specific

steps in order to from an Old Testament text to a Christ centered message and provides a very helpful and detailed illustration of this process from Genesis 22. In this illustration, he not only demonstrates the ten steps for preparing the message, he demonstrates when and how each of the approaches (redemptive-historical progression, promise-fulfillment, typology, analogy, longitudinal themes, NT references, and contrast) is applied in the exegetical analysis and homiletic formulation of that text. Chapter 8 further demonstrates the value of this method by showing the exegetical results produced when the method is applied to seven Old Testament texts commonly interpreted allegorically by preachers of the past.

Evaluation and Conclusions

Without question PCOT makes a valuable and scholarly contribution to the concept of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. In addition to the strengths already mentioned in this review, perhaps the greatest strength to the book is the organization and arrangement of the material into a format that is both readable and understandable. The footnoting is both thorough and extensive demonstrating that Greidanus is familiar with the current literature on the topic. The historical overview of chapters 3 and 4 is worth the price of the book. The explanation of his methodology is adequate without overwhelming the reader and the examples used provide the reader with much “grist” for his own mill.

However, the book is not without weaknesses. First, despite his obvious attempt to present his material in a readable fashion, the average reader may find PCOT a bit overwhelming. A second related concern is that the method, while well explained, is relatively complicated and may be too daunting for the average preacher to employ in

regular weekly sermon preparation. A more serious weakness, at least for this reviewer, is Greidanus' somewhat perplexing openness to scholars who would not take a conservative approach to many issues related to the Old Testament. This is predominately seen in his citations but sometimes it does appear right in his text. An example is the confusion created by his cautious citation of James Barr in one place and then in the next paragraph he explains his understanding of where and how Barr misses the point but goes on to posit a major point of agreement with Barr. (p. 38). Another example is his favorable citation of Ridderbos. (p. 58) In fairness to Greidanus, a careful reading often clarifies where he differs from those he cites and in some cases, on a particular point he understandably cites men he does not agree with. Nevertheless, a fair reading of the book might lead one to conclude Greidanus is open to criticism on this point.

Three concluding observations should be kept in mind by the responsible reader. First, Greidanus is writing from a thorough covenantal theology as his guiding hermeneutic. While this may or may not be a weakness depending on the hermeneutic of reader, it is clearly throughout the book and must be considered by the reader in evaluating how to implement certain portions of his methodology. Second, the strength of the book and its emphasis on preaching Christ from the Old Testament may be turned to a weakness by the non-discerning reader. In employing the seven steps of his Christocentric model and in reading how Greidanus applies this to texts in every spectrum of Old Testament literature, one might easily be led to an illegitimate approach that seeks to "find Christ in every text." Undoubtedly, Greidanus has rightly called attention to preaching Christ from the Old Testament and has given us a careful approach to doing so.

However, the complexity of the approach as well as the multiplicity of “ways” in which this can be done can lead to an illegitimate application in some areas of the Old Testament. It is one thing to use these methods to preach Christ where He may legitimately be found in the Old Testament; it is another thing entirely to preach Him from every single text. While Greidanus does not adopt this approach, in the opinion of this reviewer, he does not do enough to guard the reader from going down this path. Finally, Greidanus’ approach to reading Christ in the Old Testament tends to begin with the New Testament as a starting point without making enough distinction between the modern exegete starting there and the New Testament apostles starting there. The apostles may have started at the New Testament but possessed a thorough going familiarity with the Old Testament that for the most part is missing in many modern exegetes. This leads to two dangers that in the mind of this reviewer are very real in Greidanus’ approach. The first is to pass too quickly over dispensational interpretations of certain texts and miss the impact that those texts were to have on Israel. The original meaning was to a specific audience and in the Old Testament, that audience was pre-Christ’s coming. In preaching Christ from these texts, Greidanus needs to do more to caution the reader against moving away too quickly from the original intent of the text to the Christological intent as seen in light of the fuller picture offered by the New Testament. Additionally, this approach tends to create a disdain for the ethical and moral nature of many of these Old Testament texts. Rather than seeing the ethical/moral implications of the text and their legitimate application to the modern audience, Greidanus’ method tends to move past these applications in search of the Christological truth contained in the account. In an age where ethical preaching (particularly in Old

Testament texts) is dismissed as mere moralism, Greidanus' approach may serve to further accentuate the problem rather than as a helpful and necessary corrective.

On the whole, these weakness are not sufficient to undercut the value of Greidanus' contribution to the issue of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. In calling preachers back to the Old Testament, *PCOT* is a worthy and helpful addition to any preacher's library.