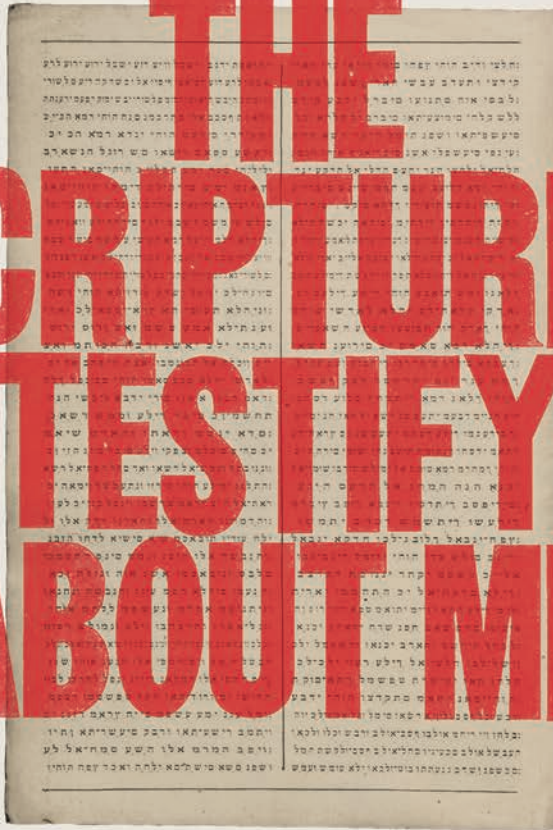


# THE SCRIPTURES TOTTER ABOUT ME.



## *JESUS AND THE GOSPEL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT*

EDITED BY

# D. A. CARSON

TGC

*The Scriptures Testify about Me: Jesus and the Gospel in the Old Testament*

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# PREFACE

The book you hold in your hands contains the written form of the plenary addresses given in April 2011 at the national conference of The Gospel Coalition, in Chicago. The audio and video forms of those addresses are still available on our website ([thegospelcoalition.org](http://thegospelcoalition.org)).

The theme of that conference was “They Testify about Me: Preaching Jesus and the Gospel from the Old Testament.” Not a few of the accompanying workshops were tied, directly or indirectly, to the same theme. The conference title has been slightly modified to become the title of this book.

So as not to arouse false expectations, I should specify what these eight plenary addresses do *not* provide. They do not provide a “how to” resource for preachers: a manual on “how to read the Old Testament in the light of the New,” or something of that sort. The best “how to manual” along those lines is the book by G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation*. Still less does the book you are reading attempt to comment on every place where the New Testament quotes or alludes to the Old: that would require a very large tome, and one is already available: G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, which is meant to be a reference tool for preachers and other Bible teachers.

What the addresses in this book offer is something more modest but with more immediate effect, namely, some examples of Christian preachers handling a variety of highly diverse Old Testament texts. The exception is the first chapter, which ably in-

troduces the subject. The remaining seven focus squarely on Old Testament passages and bring the reader to Jesus and the gospel.

These seven expositions of Old Testament texts vary enormously as to how the Old Testament text is handled. In some cases the preacher focuses on the details of the text, and, because the text is demonstrably predictive, finds his way to Jesus in a straightforward fashion. In other cases the preacher relies on typology—on discerning the persons, places, and institutions that constitute massive patterns in the Old Testament that spin out into trajectories pointing forward to Jesus. In one or two cases, the preacher expounds the “big idea” of the assigned text and, in a kind of analogical argument, arrives at the same “big idea” in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Again, a preacher may show how the sequence of developing revelation in the Old Testament forces the reader toward the culmination of that sequence, Jesus himself.

In every case, our hope and prayer is that these expositions will prove not only clarifying but humbling, enriching, and edifying, as well as incentives to keep preaching and teaching Old Testament texts.

D. A. Carson

# STUDYING THE SCRIPTURES AND FINDING JESUS

John 5:31–47

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

Meditating on the theme of preaching Jesus and the gospel from the Old Testament ought to thrill us. Some people might hear a theme like this and be puzzled by it, wondering what in the world we are even talking about. If we who are pastors are honest, however, we should be chastened that far too many members of our own churches might also wonder what we are talking about.

We think about these theological concerns with a sense of urgency and hope, even as we recognize that something has gone wrong. In his book *Generation Ex-Christian*, Drew Dyck writes of “leavers,” his term for young people who have left evangelical churches.<sup>1</sup> Dyck provides a helpful typology of this group:

- Postmoderns think the evangelical message is too narrow.
- Recoilers had some bad church experiences and thus have written off the church.
- Modernists bought into an anti-supernatural worldview and now want nothing to do with biblical truth.
- Neo-pagans play around with various sorts of spirituality.
- Spiritual rebels insist on their own autonomy.
- Drifters wandered slowly away from the church.

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<sup>1</sup>Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith . . . and How to Bring Them Back* (Chicago: Moody, 2010).

Although the church has always had those who have simply disappeared from us, evangelicals in our day recognize that a frighteningly large number of young people are leaving. This should cause us to ask some important questions. The most important and fundamental question is *why*?

In two recent books, Christian Smith and his team have described the spirituality of young people in America.<sup>2</sup> In their first study, they engage in a massive research project on what these young people actually believe. They define this belief system in terms of three words that should now be classic in our imagination: “moralistic therapeutic deism.” These young people believe that God wants his creatures to behave, that God wants his creatures to feel good about themselves, and that God exists but is not involved in individual lives. Then, in the second work, Smith and his colleagues look at a large sample and focus on evangelicals who are now young adults—“emerging adults.”

Kenda Creasy Dean, doing further research out of this same project, suggests in *Almost Christian* that many of these young people are not really Christian at all—at least not by any normal biblical, theological definition.<sup>3</sup> They are “Christian-ish.”<sup>4</sup> Dean provides a severe indictment that almost certainly applies to more than just the younger generation in the United States. No wonder they leave—what is to keep them? We wonder how this happened. How did we as evangelicals do this to ourselves?

Looking closely at what these young people believe, one discovers that they have evidently never been taught the gospel of Jesus Christ. The absence of biblical, gospel preaching explains how we have created in our churches a generation of moralizing, therapeutic, practical deists.

We also minister within a context of very real challenges from

<sup>2</sup>Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. “Becoming Christian-ish” is the title of chapter 1.



Protestant liberalism. Although now nearly two centuries old, liberalism is back—it just returns again and again. There are open denials of inerrancy and open refutations of essential doctrines—even the metanarrative of the gospel is being rejected. There is a call for a new kind of Christianity, one that does not move from creation to fall to redemption and to consummation. That story is supposedly captive to Greco-Roman philosophy and not to Scripture. But in order to change the metanarrative, one has to deny a great deal of Scripture. Hence, the great relevance and urgency in thinking about the metanarrative of Scripture and the manner in which we preach the gospel of Jesus Christ from the Old Testament texts.

And yet, even with all these challenges, there is much to encourage us. In my travels, I have the privilege of meeting with people from all different generations and locations who are passionately committed to the gospel. And, when I am among the younger generation in particular, I meet with many who are confessional and convictional. They represent a wave of energy for planting gospel churches, as well as for reforming and recovering congregations. This is a missional generation driven by missiological vision. So there is a real reason for hope and a genuine reason for encouragement.

As we consider the theme of preaching Jesus and the gospel from the Old Testament, we turn to John 5:31-47 and find a powerful text wherein Jesus spoke of witnesses to his ministry:

If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. And the Fa-

ther who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?<sup>5</sup>

The background of this text is the christological declaration and revelation that have already taken place in John 5. This chapter begins with the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda. Jesus asked the man, "Do you want to be healed?" (v. 6). He commanded, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk" (v. 8). "And at once the man was healed" (v. 9). Then after demonstrating his own authority, Jesus declared:

Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has

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<sup>5</sup>All Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the English Standard Version.

eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. (John 5:19–29)

The crucial issue of hearing and believing is essential to this text. Jesus offered a straightforward promise: “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (v. 24). Those who hear will live, and there will be a day when even the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. Hearing and believing lead to eternal life.

Jesus spoke about witnesses to his ministry. He acknowledged the necessity of witnesses, a reality that the Old Testament confirms (vv. 31–32). His ministry must be attested. A prophet’s word must be tested; there must be witnesses.

For those who refuse to believe and receive him, Jesus set out witnesses. Like an attorney setting forth his case, Jesus brought forth four witnesses to make clear that he is not without adequate witnesses. The people simply refused to see what was put before them. They refused to hear the very witnesses whom the Father sent.

### **WITNESS 1: JOHN THE BAPTIST**

Jesus described John the Baptist as “a burning and shining lamp” (John 5:35). Jesus spoke of John the Baptist in the most positive terms. Not only did the people hear John the Baptist; they sent for him (v. 33). They wanted to hear from him. They demanded to hear from him, and he bore “witness to the truth” (v. 33). Jesus did not receive his self-identity from John (v. 34), but John repre-

sented the gift of the Father to the people so they would know the identity of the Son.

The prologue to John's Gospel says that John "came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world" (1:7-9). The background of this is almost assuredly Psalm 132:13-17:

For the LORD has chosen Zion;  
 he has desired it for his dwelling place:  
 "This is my resting place forever;  
 here I will dwell, for I have desired it.  
 I will abundantly bless her provisions;  
 I will satisfy her poor with bread.  
 Her priests I will clothe with salvation,  
 and her saints will shout for joy.  
 There I will make a horn to sprout for David;  
 I have prepared a lamp for my anointed."

Jesus was saying that the Father prepared the "lamp." The people saw the "lamp." They sought him out and even enjoyed him for a moment. But they did not receive his witness. Even as the Scriptures explained his role, the people refused to understand. They should have been expecting the one who was not the light, but would point to the light—the true light that saves. Jesus pointed to John the Baptist, the burning and shining light, and said, in effect: "He was ignited. The Father ignited John to give off the light to announce the coming of the Son of Man. But you would not see it."

There is a necessary Old Testament background to understanding John as witness. But the very people who should have recognized John the Baptist as the lamp prepared for God's anointed failed to recognize him. Jesus made clear that John's witness was for the benefit of the people. Yet sadly, when the witness testified, they would not receive his testimony.

But John the Baptist was not the only witness.

## **WITNESS 2: JESUS'S WORKS**

Jesus's own works—the miracles, the signs—testified of him. His own works were, in effect, witnesses. Jesus performed these signs right before the eyes of those who said, “Give us a sign.” But, they refused to see the signs for what they were. These acts and signs were intended to underline and reveal Christ's identity and thus his authority to authenticate his message. They were to bear witness that Jesus is the Christ, the very Son of God, the Davidic king, the Lord's anointed. But the people would not hear.

In the next chapter, John reports a miracle that is one of the first miracles many of us remember hearing about: the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1–15). This miracle illustrates what Jesus said (John 5) about his works. After Jesus fed the five thousand, those who came to find Jesus asked him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?” (John 6:30). Do not miss the audacity of their questions. They asked Jesus these questions the day *after* the feeding of the five thousand—*after* that miracle, *after* that sign, *after* that work. They refused to see it. They asked Jesus what sign he would give and what work he would perform, as if nothing had happened. They asked the question as if Jesus had not healed a man at the pool of Bethesda—a miracle about which they complained because Jesus did it on the Sabbath—and then miraculously fed the multitudes.

Jesus said, “. . . the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me” (John 5:36). But the works of Jesus were not the final witness.

## **WITNESS 3: THE FATHER**

“The Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent” (John 5:37–38). Here is one of the most stark and direct indictments from the mouth of Jesus. He told them

that they did not have God's Word in them—that they had actually never heard.

Contrast that with Deuteronomy 4, where Moses reminded the children of Israel that they had not seen the Lord but had heard his voice. God's people *hear* God's voice. Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking in the midst of the fire and survived (cf. Deut. 5:26)? But now Jesus said, "You have actually *never* heard." They would not even hear when the Father spoke at Jesus's baptism, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased."

The first witness was John the Baptist, a burning and shining light; second were the works of Jesus himself; third was the Father's witness; and the fourth witness, climactically in Jesus's progression of argument, is the Scriptures.

#### WITNESS 4: THE SCRIPTURES

The text is hauntingly clear: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40).

"You search the Scriptures" describes a very good thing. Jesus certainly does not counsel people *not* to search the Scriptures. Searching the Scriptures is what believers do. It is what we are taught to do. It is what we rightly do. But what is so horrible and humbling is that people can devote their lives to searching the Scriptures yet miss the point—and not be saved.

The entire Scriptures—and Jesus was referring specifically to the Old Testament—bear witness to Jesus. In other words, Jesus said, in effect, "You cannot read those words without reading of me. You cannot read the Law without reading of me. You cannot read the History without reading of me. You cannot read the Psalms without reading of me. You cannot read the Prophets without reading of me."

"It is they that bear witness about me." The climactic, confirming, final witness is Scripture. Therefore, a people trained in the

Scriptures should have been ready for Christ. They should have been anticipating him. They should have been looking and yearning for him. They should have been ready for his coming because the Old Testament constantly, continually, cumulatively, and consistently testifies to Christ.

We do not look to the Old Testament merely to find the *background* for Christ and his ministry, nor even for references that anticipate him. We must find Christ in the Old Testament—not here and there but everywhere. Christ validated the serious study of searching the Scriptures, but he warned that the most serious student of the Scriptures could miss the entire point. Jesus was not speaking to Scripture illiterates or to people who lacked serious study of the Scriptures. He was not speaking to those who refused to devote themselves to biblical scholarship. He was not speaking to those who took the Scriptures frivolously. Rather, he was speaking to those who had devoted their entire lives to studying the Scriptures, but missed the entire point.

Note that Jesus did not say that this “missing the point” was an intellectual problem. It was not a lack of knowledge. Their problem was moral, theological, and spiritual. The people refused to see:

- “You refuse to come to me” (John 5:40).
- “You do not receive me” (v. 43).
- “You . . . do not seek the glory that comes from the only God” (v. 44).

Jesus indicted them.

Jesus then cited Moses as their accuser. The very one they cited as their authority accused them. Jesus described Moses as the one “on whom you have set your hope” (v. 45), but Moses had set his hope upon Jesus. And “if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (v. 47). In other words, Jesus accused them of refusing to hear what Jesus was telling them. Jesus indicted them for their absolute refusal to hear and believe what the Scriptures had taught them.

When Jesus spoke of these four witnesses, it was not that they were lacking or hidden. They were right before the people. The witnesses came and testified, but the people would not see, hear, and believe.

After Jesus healed the man who was blind from birth, the Pharisees accused the man during his second interrogation: “You are [Jesus’s] disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from” (John 9:28–29). Again, they validated exactly what Jesus said about them in John 5. In other words, “You think that you have set your hope upon Moses, but Moses set his hope upon me. Moses wrote about me. You claim to be the sons of Moses, but you betray that you are not when you say, ‘but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’” They betrayed not ignorance but willful rejection, willful blindness, and willful deafness.

We often hear people speak of New Testament Christianity, and we understand what they mean. But make no mistake, we are called to *biblical* Christianity. Christ himself declares that there is *Old Testament* Christianity. The Old Testament includes the gospel. Jesus is present in the Old Testament, not merely when speaking of Moses in a text like the following: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him” (Deut. 18:18); but also in all that Moses wrote and in all that the prophets have said. Jesus is present in all the Scriptures.

## IDEOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL DISMISSALS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus rebuked those who should know, who should see, who should hear, who should believe—and yet, will not. Jesus indicted the people who claimed to be not just the sons of Moses, but also the sons of Abraham—yet would not hear, believe, and be saved.



The Jews said to him, . . . “Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’ But you have not known him [cf. John 5:37: “His voice you have never heard”]. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” (John 8:52–58)

But these words also rebuke the church of the Lord Jesus Christ in our own generation for our misuse and neglect of the Old Testament. In our own way, we can commit the same insult to both Christ and the Scriptures. For many, the Old Testament is simply a problem. Throughout the history of the Christian church, there have been those who have struggled to understand what to do with the Old Testament. Some of the sources of the problem are ideological and theological.

First, in a context of political correctness—particularly within the academy—some call the Old Testament the “Hebrew Scriptures” or the “Hebrew Bible.” Unless that designation does no more than highlight the dominant language, a Christian cannot accept the term because it insinuates that the Old Testament is someone else’s book, that it is foreign territory to the church.

Second, there is the historical Marcionite impulse to reject the Old Testament as revealing a different deity. It is frightening to see how many evangelical children and young people just assume that this is indeed the pattern. They pick it up one way or the other and are little Marcionites. You wonder where they get this idea, and then you talk to their parents. There are Marcionites in our pews and in far too many of our pulpits. Many of them do not know it. They are *practical* Marcionites, even if not card-carrying ones.

Third, some argue that the Old Testament should be read only

on its own terms without any reference to the New Testament. Some suggest this even within the Christian church, even within some evangelical institutions and faculties. It comes down to insisting that Christians need to do synagogue readings when we come to the Old Testament.

Fourth, classical dispensationalism is right to see ethical development but wrong to deny continuity. Taken at face value, the classical dispensationalists argued for what amounted to two completely different ethical systems in the two Testaments. They were certainly right to point to the higher law found in the New Testament, but wrong to argue against the basic continuity of the covenants, with the Old Testament and the law completely fulfilled in the person and work of Christ. This exegetical and theological error has opened the door to much mischief and misunderstanding.

Fifth, there is a moral argument against the Old Testament, an updated Marcionite temptation. It is not particularly new, but it became more focused in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In his Lyman Beecher lectures on preaching, given at Yale in the early part of the twentieth century, Harry Emerson Fosdick spoke of the task of preaching the Old Testament in general, and a very specific text in particular, as “intellectually ruinous and morally debilitating.”<sup>6</sup> Fosdick said that modern people rightly recoil from these Old Testament texts, and that it would be an insult to modern morality to try to preach them or even to try to rescue them in some way. Fosdick said we should not try to harmonize them or come to terms with them. Rather, we should just write off sections of the biblical text as the musings of an ancient nomadic people and be done with it.

More recently, Kenton Sparks, in his denial of biblical inerrancy, wrote of the Old Testament and “biblical texts that strike us as downright sinister or evil.”<sup>7</sup> In like manner, Brian McLaren

<sup>6</sup>Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 27.

<sup>7</sup>Kenton L. Sparks, “After Inerrancy: Evangelicals and the Bible in a Postmodern Age, Part 2,” *The BioLogos Forum: Science and Faith in Dialogue*, June 10, 2010, accessed <http://biologos.org/blog/after-inerrancy-evangelicals-and-the-bible-in-a-postmodern-age-part-2>. Cf. Kenton L. Sparks,

wrote about the Genesis account of God's actions in the story of Noah and described the story as "profoundly disturbing."<sup>8</sup>

## IGNORANCE AND NEGLECT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

But these ideological and theological dismissals of the Old Testament are not the main problem in our midst. In our circles—our pulpits, Sunday school classes, and Bible study groups—the biggest problem is the ignorance and neglect of the Old Testament. We must admit it: a good many evangelical preachers and Bible teachers simply have no idea what to do with the Old Testament.

Few remember Leslie Poles Hartley's 1953 novel *The Go-Between*, and most people tend to remember only the opening line: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." To many Christians and even pastors and preachers, the Old Testament is a foreign book. They do things differently there. And they certainly do: arks and animals in a menagerie afloat, dead animals and hewn bullocks, rams in thickets, slavery in Egypt, burning bushes, staffs that turn into snakes, bronze serpents, manna in the morning, pillars of fire and columns of smoke, convoluted history of conquests of kings, intrigue, adultery, murder, incest, a preoccupation with bodily fluids, bears who eat boys, boys who kill giants, prophets who taunt idolaters, prophets who throw fits, prophets who sit by gates and weep, poetry that reads like praise, poetry that reads like existentialist philosophy, Persian writing on walls, foreign kings who roam like wild beasts, a prostitute who hides spies, spies who lose heart, women who summon courage, donkeys that talk, a strong man who commits suicide, stuttering leaders, naked patriarchs, majestic praise, predictive prophecy, lamentation, law, statutes, ordinances—in all of its glory. And all of it reveals Christ. Every bit of it.

They do things differently there, and that is the point. These

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*God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

<sup>8</sup>Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 108.

things all anticipate Christ. They look forward to Christ and make us yearn for Christ. They should help us to recognize the Christ. “It is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39).

## HOW EVANGELICAL PREACHERS MISUSE THE OLD TESTAMENT

In what ways do evangelical preachers misuse the Old Testament?

First, many preachers simply avoid the Old Testament at all costs. I have actually heard some preachers state as a matter of principle that they preach from the New Testament because it is the Christian book. They are practical Marcionites. They are robbing their people of the knowledge of Christ from the Scriptures. How impoverished is that preaching and how undernourished are those congregations. Speaking of the Old Testament, Fosdick said, “All the king’s horses and all the king’s men could hardly drag them [i.e., preachers] into dealing with certain [Old Testament] passages that used to be the glory of our fathers’ preaching.”<sup>9</sup>

Second, many evangelical preachers actually teach Old Testament texts and say a few words about them, but mostly as background—as though the Old Testament were a different story before we get to “our” story, the real story. But Christ says in John 5 (and the rest of the New Testament agrees) that it is all one story. The Old Testament is not the story we have to know before we know the real story. Rather, the gospel is in all of it.

Third, preachers moralize the Old Testament. We know we ought not to do that, but it is second nature to us. God made us moral creatures. We moralize even when we do not want to do so. We moralize about moralizing. Of course, apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ, the only alternative to a moralizing creature is a sociopath.

The problem starts very early. We are raised to hear the Scripture, especially the Old Testament, in moralizing terms. That is how we are taught from the very beginning. Look at the Bible story

<sup>9</sup>Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible*, 1.

books for children. Most of them (not all of them, thanks be to God) are dripping with morality tales. It is as if the Old Testament is our Jewish-Christian form of Aesop's Fables: do this; do not do that. It starts at the parent's knee, and then continues in Sunday school and Vacation Bible School—all the children's church programs ratify it. We have updated our pedagogical technology from flannelgraphs to PowerPoint, but it is still moralizing.

So, when we arrive at the period of adolescence that Christian Smith and his colleagues studied, we discover that the basic belief system of most of our adolescents is moralistic therapeutic deism. Well, that is what they received from us, and not just from our preaching of the Old Testament; moralizing is what they heard from virtually all our preaching. In fact, if there is any period of life that tends to be subjected to moralizing in the most eccentric and intensive ways, it is adolescence. That is what most Christian youth ministries do. From generation to generation, they just update and add new subjects to the moralizing of adolescents.

But moralizing is not what our text is about. More precisely, moralizing is not the redemptive purpose of the text. That is not how it testifies of Christ. There are moral lessons there, and we are wrong to ignore them. Even the New Testament sometimes cites the Old Testament in terms of moral lessons we should learn. When it does, we must learn them. But it is wrong to think that moralizing is the main point of the New Testament's use of the Old. It is tragic to make moralizing the main thing.

Those whom Jesus rebuked in John 5 would agree with every moralistic point that any Christian preacher makes and probably a great deal more that we would not even think to make. It is not wrong to see David as a boy who demonstrated courage because of his faith in God; David killed the giant when others cowered. The problem, however, is in missing the greater point. The redemptive content is that David was God's anointed, the king whose dynasty would never end. This content points directly to King Jesus, seated on David's throne—the one who is prophet, priest, and king.

Moralism is the default mode for preachers. It's second nature.

But it horribly misinforms the congregation. It horribly malforms their understanding of the gospel because it tells them what they really want to hear, which is that they can please God through moral improvement. But moralizing cannot save. We must do better than this if we are to escape the rebuke of Christ: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me” (John 5:46).

## HOW CHRISTIANS THROUGHOUT CHURCH HISTORY HAVE INTERPRETED THE OLD TESTAMENT

### The Church Fathers

The Old Testament has been a challenge in the history of the Christian church—not only in recent centuries but going all the way back to the early church. One of the ways that church fathers dealt with the Old Testament was to allegorize it—a literary and imaginative form of moralizing. They added a good deal to it that most of us would find not only antiquarian but also having little to do with the text. They knew they had to do something with the Old Testament, and there are some faithful examples even among the Patristic fathers. But it is clear that the Christian church was already struggling with what to do with the Old Testament.

### Martin Luther

Fast-forward to the Reformation and one encounters Martin Luther, who saw in the Scriptures a radical dichotomy between law and gospel. Yet, Luther came to understand, along with the apostle Paul, that even though the law cannot save, there is grace in the law. Luther was not sure what to do with this. He was not even consistent with what to do with the law in his teaching and personal life. In his early ministry as a Reformer, Luther emphatically urged young preachers to avoid preaching the law. Then Luther had children. And note the content of the first section of his “Small Catechism,” written for the training of children: “The Ten Commandments.”<sup>10</sup> There is grace in that, too.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001).

John Calvin

John Calvin represents a fountain of health on this. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* methodologically and theologically sets this out with grandeur. It is hard in our contemporary context to imagine better than what he teaches us. The title of book 2 of the *Institutes* is “Of the Knowledge of God the Redeemer, in Christ, as First Manifested to the Fathers, under the Law, and Thereafter to Us under the Gospel.” Could any of us state it better than that?

The title of chapter 7 of book 2 is “The Law Given, Not to Retain a People for Itself, but to Keep Alive the Hope of Salvation in Christ until His Advent.” So we see that the purpose of the law is to foster hope.

The title of chapter 9 of book 2 is “Christ, Though Known to the Jews under the Law, yet Manifested Only under the Gospel.” It is not that we do not need the gospel. It is by the gospel that we are saved. But we should know our need for the gospel and the promise of the gospel, and the Christ promised us in the gospel, even by reading the law. As Paul wrote in Romans 7, without the law he would not have known that he was a coveter (v. 7). Until that knowledge came, he did not know that he needed a Savior. There is grace in the knowledge of our sin, and there is grace in our knowledge of the need for a Savior. And there is grace in the fact that a Savior was all along promised and revealed, even under the law.

In speaking of how we should be trained by the New Testament to read the Old Testament, Calvin pointed to 1 Peter 1:10–12:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

In our own day, how impoverished we would be if we did not have witnesses such as Geerhardus Vos, Richard Gaffin, Edmund Clowney, and others who taught not only a new generation but now also successive generations the importance of seeing a redemptive-historical hermeneutic and applying it to all the Scriptures. In recent years, there has been a renaissance, a recovery, and even a celebration of how to preach the Bible as a whole. We are rediscovering how to understand the metanarrative—to find great joy in preaching it and even greater joy in coming to see people understand it. I am so thankful for works by such influential figures as Graeme Goldsworthy, Sidney Greidanus, and Bryan Chapell—scholars who have literally changed categories for us.

## HEBREWS

Even as Calvin argued from 1 Peter, we need to let the New Testament teach us how to read the Old Testament. As such, where better to look than the book of Hebrews? It begins by telling us, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:1–2). This is the continuous pattern of divine revelation: all redemptive, all pointing to the climactic revelation in Christ.

What about Moses? Moses was the one, Jesus said, “on whom you have set your hope” (John 5:45). “Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son” (Heb. 3:5–6). We should greatly respect Moses. He was central, even essential, in the Old Testament. He played an important part in salvation history. But Moses was a “servant” in God’s house; Christ is a “son.”

What about Joshua? Or what about the Sabbath? “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of



God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his" (Heb. 4:8-10). What should we have learned from the Sabbath as an institution or as a command? We should have learned that we must have an eternal Sabbath when we rest not only from our earthly labors but also from our attempts at self-righteousness to prove ourselves just before a holy God.

Or, what about Abraham?

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. (Heb. 6:13-20)

Or what should we have seen when we heard of Melchizedek? We should have seen that if Abraham gave an offering to Melchizedek, then there is something greater to which Melchizedek is pointing. And the author of Hebrews points us there:

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. (Heb. 7:26-28)

We should have been looking for the Son.

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain." But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. (Heb. 8:1-7)

We should have been able to look to the tabernacle and see not only the Holy Place but also the Most Holy Place. Even the furnishings in the tabernacle point to Christ. And we should have been able to see what was going on in the tabernacle (and later in the temple) and say, "There has to be something that will eliminate this veil. Someone is going to have to do something to achieve peace with God. And, of course, God will have to do that thing." As he did in Christ:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Heb. 9:11-14)

Christ has appeared. He is the “high priest of the good things that have come.” He entered the tabernacle not made with human hands. He entered it once for all time. In other words, in looking to the sacrificial system of old, we should have seen the succession of Levitical priests coming one after another, generation after generation, performing sacrifice after sacrifice. In so doing, we should have realized that this does not achieve eternal life. It does not eventuate in eternal life. It does not secure an eternal redemption.

In my own Pelagian stage (and this is where just about every adolescent is at some point), I had a hard time sleeping at night over the issue of confession of sin. I had come to recognize myself as a sinner, and this recognition, by God’s grace, was stronger than I had ever had at any other point in my life. Scripture instructed me that sin was ever before me. So I would pray a prayer of confession and then think, “What if I die before I confess again? I am going to fall short of the glory of God before I get up off of my knees. I am a dead man.”

In my own way, I was asking, “What’s going to happen if the priests are not allowed into the temple? What is going to happen if the temple is no more?” But then we discover that Christ is our great high priest, and he accomplishes this by being the Mediator of a new covenant.

## **CONCLUSION**

All of these things point to a fulfillment that only God in Christ can accomplish. We should have seen it. In Luke 24, as Jesus walked to Emmaus with the men, he rebuked them:

And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, but they urged him strongly,

saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:25–32)

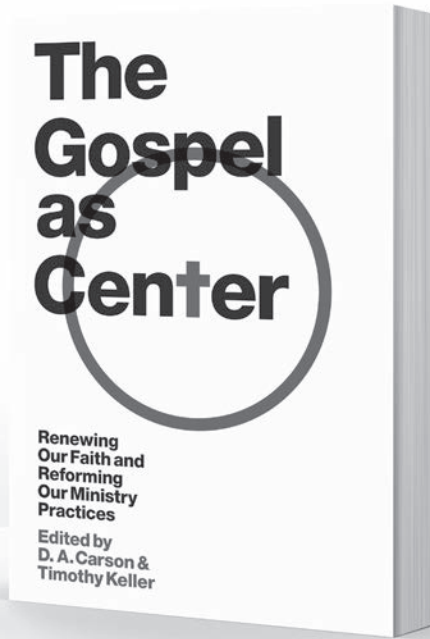
First the rebuke: “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” Then the cure: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” Then the blessing: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?”

We must preach Christ from *all* the Scriptures and find Christ in the gospel of the Old Testament as well as in the New. We need to allow the New Testament to train us how to read the Old. We must put the Bible back into the hands of believers—intact and whole—with Christ and the gospel of our redemption at the center.

And we pray to see what Luke recounts for us; we pray to see it happen again and again. Preachers, we pray to see this happen every time the Word of God is preached. Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, we should pray for this to happen in our midst every time we open the Word. We should pray to see Christ’s people ask, “Did not our hearts burn within us?”

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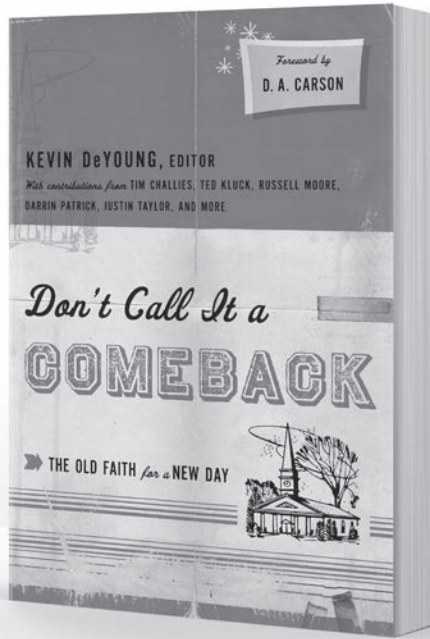


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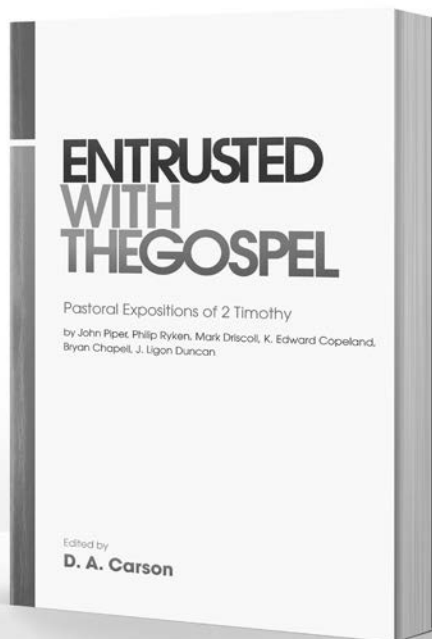
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**D. A. Carson** (PhD, Cambridge University) is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where he has taught since 1978. He is president of The Gospel Coalition and has written or edited nearly 60 books.

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