

Dr. Steven D. Mathewson

Preaching Old Testament Narratives,

Session 2, The Christ-Centered Preaching Debate

This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in his series on Preaching Old Testament Narratives. This is session number two, the Christ-Centered Preaching Debate. Hi, this is Steve Mathewson again, and this is our second session on Preaching Old Testament Narrative. In this session, we are going to talk about the Christ-Centered Preaching Debate.

Now I currently live in the Chicago, Illinois area, in the north suburbs, and people here still talk about Michael Jordan. If you are not a sports fan, he was an NBA basketball player, and he is called the GOAT, the greatest of all time, G-O-A-T, the GOAT. What's interesting is that early in his NBA career, the Chicago Bulls coaching staff disagreed over how to run the offense.

Doug Collins was a great coach. He was the head coach at the time, and his strategy was to keep the ball in Jordan's hands pretty much all the time. But one of his assistants, a guy by the name of Tex Winter, who had been around a long time, argued for what was called the triangle offense that kept the ball moving from player to player, and the disagreement just escalated.

Finally, Collins, Doug Collins, the head coach, banished Tex Winter from the bench. Well, that didn't sit very well with management, and they fired Collins, and they replaced him with another assistant coach, a guy by the name of Phil Jackson, who had been mentored by Tex Winter, and the rest is history. Phil Jackson led the Bulls and their star player, Michael Jordan, to six NBA championships.

So even if your favorite sport is soccer, you have to admire what Michael Jordan did. Now there is a debate in the field of preaching that stokes the same kind of heated disagreement, and it's the debate over whether or how to preach Christ in the Old Testament. And your conclusion will shape the way that you study and preach an Old Testament narrative text.

So I think it's worth thinking about this carefully before we proceed. A really good entry point into the debate is a controversy that raged in the Reformed churches in Holland prior to World War II, and the controversy was over how to preach what they called the historical text, that is, the Old Testament narrative text. Dr. Sidney Graydonis, who has taught for years at Calvin Theological Seminary, explored this controversy in his 1970 doctoral dissertation called *Sola Scriptura, Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts*.

By the way, that is still in print. Wipf & Stock still publishes that. You can get that today.

And I say kind of jokingly, it's one of the most boring and one of the most utterly fascinating books I've ever read. It's only the boring parts because it's a PhD dissertation and there's a lot of names, Dutch names, and places that you're probably not going to understand. It's probably not part of our world, but the story behind it is fascinating.

So in the days before World War II, in the Dutch Reformed churches, which is interesting, we're talking Reformed churches, there's one group that adopted an exemplary approach. And in the exemplary approach, when they looked at an Old Testament narrative, they looked at the characters in the stories as either models to imitate or to avoid. You know, David did what was right here; we need to be like David.

Or here's a place where David did what was wrong, don't be like David. So that's one side. The other side argued for what Graydonis called the redemptive historical approach, or some today would call it a Christocentric approach, which proclaimed how the story points forward to the person and work of Christ.

And interestingly, this was an in-house disagreement. Again, when you think about Reformed scholars and preachers today, most would be very Christocentric. But in those Dutch Reformed churches in Holland prior to World War II, some were doing exemplary preaching, some were doing redemptive historical preaching.

And that debate raged in the 1930s and the 1940s. But then something happened, and you can probably guess what it was. The Germans invaded the Netherlands in May 1940, and they occupied it in 1945.

As Graydonis observes, the disruptive influence of this occupation on the normal pattern of life was hardly conducive to carrying on the controversy. Now, after the war, you would think, well, okay, they would pick up the controversy again, but there was a schism in the church that kept the debate from resurfacing. So 25 years later, in 1970, Sidney Graydonis is doing his doctoral dissertation at the Free University, and he revisits the controversy, and then he offers his own critique and model for preaching the historical text of the Old Testament.

Now, here's a basic overview of each approach. The exemplary approach looked at the characters in a narrative as examples either to imitate or to avoid. And it took its cue from three New Testament passages.

One of them is 1 Corinthians 10, where the apostle Paul cites God's judgment on the rebellious people during their wilderness wanderings. You remember that? And he

cites them as examples. In verses 6 and 11, that's how almost all English translations translate those words.

These warnings are examples. All right? Then, there's Hebrews 11. Hebrews 11 interpreted the redemptive history of the Old Testament in an exemplary sense.

So Abraham had faith; we ought to have faith too. And then, finally, exemplary preachers pointed to the usage of Elijah's experience in 1 Kings 18. The writer of James remembers this as support.

You know, Elijah was a man like us, and he prayed for rain, and we ought to pray as well. So that's the exemplary approach. The redemptive historical approach argued that these Old Testament historical texts have a specific purpose, and that is the revelation of God's coming to the world in Christ.

So if you're a preacher, you want to preach on, you know, on covetousness or prayer, you ought to take a text which presents God's direct revelation on these matters, rather than trying to illustrate them from a narrative text. And redemptive historical preachers in this debate oppose the exemplary approach as a fragmentary interpretation, which reads the Bible as a collection of biographies. So that's kind of, yeah, their take on things.

Now, they argued that we need to point forward to Christ. They said this does not mean drawing a magical line or making an acrobatic leap from Christ to the cross or to the Incarnation. But they argued you need to show the trajectory for moving from the Old Testament to Christ.

Now, what did preachers on that side of the debate do with 1 Corinthians 10? Well, they argued that the words translated as examples in 1 Corinthians 10, the Greek words were actually tupoi, and that would be spelled t-y-p-o-i, tupoi, and you can kind of hear the word type in that. So they argued that tupoi and tupikos in verse 11 refer to prefigurations of events in the Messianic Age rather than to what we'd call pedagogical examples. They also said, given that Hebrews 11 includes extra-biblical persons as well as biblical ones, we ought to take the exemplars of faith as concrete illustrations rather than, you know, as this is the way that we always interpret Old Testament narrative.

So, those are the two sides. Now, what did Sidney Graydonis say? Well, Graydonis, after pondering the arguments of both sides, I think he offered a brilliant critique. Essentially, he argued for a mediating position.

He agreed with the redemptive historical side that the historical narratives in the Old Testament do not intend to give biographies of people, but rather proclaim the redemptive acts of God for man, for human beings. He said, "Look, these narratives

bear witness to Christ, the one who's been active from the beginning, is the Logos. So, great, he sounds like he's redemptive historical.

But, he also agreed with the exemplary side that these narratives have what we might call normative as well as historical authority. He talked about the ethical thrust in these narratives. Mentioned that in the first session that some of the narrative books in the Old Testament are part of a collection called the Former Prophets, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings.

They're delivering a prophetic message every bit as much as Isaiah or Jeremiah would do, but they're just using narrative as their vehicle. And so, Graydonis agrees. He said, "You know, these narratives, yes, they're historical accounts, but they're not just giving us a history of Israel, and they're not only prefiguring Christ, pointing to Christ, they're also telling God's people how to live.

So, he concluded, one does not have to turn to another category of text or fall back on examples to find warning, comfort, and admonition. All of this is already contained in the historical text. So, he argued that the proclamation of these texts, the preaching of these narrative texts, must be relevant, communicating the ethical thrust of a passage within the light of a narrative's God-centered framework.

He says, after all, the historical accounts in the Old Testament proclaim God's acts to people in their particular needs. Now, what he did then, going back to the redemptive historical approach, he faulted the redemptive historical side for confining the Old Testament narrative text in a framework that really keeps them from saying what they intend to say. But he also criticized the exemplary approach for reading them in a moralistic kind of way.

You know, David did this, you should do this, or David was wrong over here, don't be like David. Eighteen years after his dissertation, he worked his conclusions into a volume for pastors and aspiring preachers called *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*. And this was really one of the first books that told preachers, evangelical preachers, how to deal with Old Testament narrative.

He had four different kinds of biblical literature, but he had a couple of chapters on Old Testament narrative. And I found it really helpful, and I thought his mean-eating approach was right on target. And then, he changed his mind.

In an interesting twist, Graydonis argued for a much stricter Christ-centered approach in his 1999 volume *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament, a Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*. By the way, that's a brilliant volume, and I found it very helpful, but I was personally saddened to see that he reverted away from his original conclusions, and he now counsels preachers to move from the Old

Testament text to the incarnate Christ. And he adopted a more Lutheran view, as he describes it.

It's fascinating if you want to read up on what he did. It does help understand the kind of landscape. So, what is the way forward? Well, I'm convinced, and you can disagree with me, but you just have to understand the landscape.

I'm convinced that the original mediating view of Graydonis is really the way forward for faithful preaching of Old Testament narrative text. What I'm suggesting, then, is a view that takes the strength of both major views about preaching the Old Testament. And, by the way, these views are not so much exemplary and Christocentric as they are the theocentric view that says, we are going to study this Old Testament narrative text to get at the theology.

What does this text tell us about God? So, that's one side. The other side is the Christocentric view. Again, notice that the alternatives aren't the same as they were in the Reformed churches in Holland.

Now, exemplary preaching from the Old Testament is still popular, but the leading practitioners and professors of preaching are not treating it as a viable approach. I mean, well, a viable approach exclusively. Actually, you'll have people on both sides who say that there are times when you can make room for it, when you can look at the examples in these narrative texts.

And I'll have more to say about that in a moment. By the way, no one who takes Scripture seriously denies that the Old Testament speaks of Jesus Christ. I mean, Jesus claimed this in conversations with his followers when he was raised from the dead.

You can see that in Luke's Gospel. In fact, let me read for you a couple of statements from Luke 24. You may well be familiar with these, but it's good to be reminded of them.

And you can look at these a little bit more closely. So, in Luke 24, the day of Jesus' resurrection, he is on the road to Emmaus. And in Luke 24, verses 25-27, he has a discussion with a couple of guys who are walking along the road with him.

They're his disciples, but they don't recognize him. And he began to explain to them. They're lamenting that this Jesus whom they followed was crucified.

And then they're expressing some confusion that some followers went to a tomb this morning, but he wasn't there. And they said, "Well, it's just as the woman said, but they did not see Jesus. So then, Jesus breaks into the conversation.

He said to them, How foolish you are and how slow to believe all the prophets have spoken. Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, that's one of the ways of describing the Old Testament, what we call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, Moses and the prophets, the law and the prophets. He said, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.

Boy, what I would have given to hear that conversation. To be a fly, not a fly on the wall, but a fly who's buzzing around somewhere who gets to listen in. Later, he appears to all the disciples, almost all the disciples.

And in Luke 24, beginning in verse 44, he said to them, This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms. And those three divisions, that's another way of describing the Hebrew Bible.

The law of Moses and the prophets, which would contain both the former prophets and the latter prophets. So, the former would be Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and the latter would be Isaiah, Jeremiah, and those prophets. And then the Psalms, actually, the last section of the Hebrew Bible today is called the writings, but the Psalms are such a prominent part that it's abbreviated that way.

So this is Jesus saying, all that is written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, the Psalms, the Old Testament, it has to be fulfilled. By the way, law in Hebrew is the word Torah. It's actually a word that means instruction.

Prophets would be the Nevi'im. And then the writings, which here is abbreviated as the Psalms, but the writings would be the Ketuvim. That's why sometimes today you hear Jewish people talk about the Tanakh.

T for Torah, N for Nevi'im, or writings, and the K for Ketuvim. I'm sorry, T for Torah, N for Nevi'im, which would be the prophets, and then the K, the Ketuvim, for the writings, so the Tanakh. So some will refer to the Old Testament that way.

But moving on, then Jesus opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures. He told them, " This is what is written: the Messiah shall suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. So the Old Testament part of scripture points forward to Jesus.

There's no doubt about that. There's no doubt that these narratives were also given for instruction to teach God's people how to live. There's no doubt that in some cases in the New Testament, the New Testament looks at them as examples.

So how in the world do we put all of this together? I'm going to take the different views on Christ-centered preaching, and I'm going to put them in three big buckets, all right? And I know, maybe you could put them in 15, but I think there are really three major views, and some within a particular bucket or a viewpoint. They may have some differences, but to me, this is a helpful way of thinking about it. The first view would be what I call the theocentric view.

This is the God-centered view, and it's saying that when we preach an Old Testament narrative, we are looking at what the text teaches us about God. By the way, preachers who adopt a theocentric approach stand in the tradition of John Calvin, who emphasized preaching a particular text with a view to exposing the intention of the author. I really learned that from Sidney Gray Donniss in his book on preaching Christ from the Old Testament.

He goes back, and he looks at the history of interpretation of the Old Testament, and he points out that that's what John Calvin did. So, for Calvin, unlike Luther, Calvin felt that theocentric preaching is implicitly Christ-centered. I mean, in other words, it's enough to preach what the text says about God, and Calvin was very critical of Luther's Christ-centered exegesis.

I think today, a couple of maybe the best representatives of the theocentric view are a couple of preachers and scholars, Drs. Ken Langley and Abraham Kuruvilla. There's a recent book.

Well, it's—how recent is it here? It's 2018, so it's still not that old. It's a book called *Homiletics and Hermeneutics, Four Views on Preaching Today*. So you'll have the redemptive historical view by Brian Chappell.

We'll talk about that view in a minute. Then you have the Christiconic view by Abraham Kuruvilla and the theocentric view by Ken Langley. And I'll let you in on a little secret.

They have the same view. I'll talk about that in a moment. Abraham Kuruvilla's Christiconic view is just a theocentric view.

He just uses a really clever way of describing it, you know, Christiconic, because he says when you preach, the theology of a text you preach about God, that's going to shape you into the image of Christ. And the Greek word image, you know, icon, so Christiconic. It's kind of slight of hand.

It's really a non-Christ-centered view of preaching. But he gets Christ in the title. Anyway, those two are basically saying the same thing, even though they would have some little shades of difference.

Langley, for example, argues that Old Testament narratives related how God has acted in, through, and despite the actions of human characters. He says the agenda is theological. To concentrate on human deeds, then, is often to miss the point.

He said, however, recognizing that God is central in these stories does not mean they have no exemplary value for moral instruction. And I would agree with him. He's right on that.

So Langley sees this as the problem with the Christocentric view. He says that in its quest to be careful not to treat the Bible as a to-do list or a self-improvement manual, he said, you know, they're so afraid of doing that that they often will suppress the imperatives of Scripture. Scripture calls us to do.

And I would argue that the former prophets are telling us how to live. I would argue that the narratives in Genesis are telling us how to live. A wonderful scholar, the late Gordon Wenham, passed away just recently.

He wrote a book called *Story as Torah*. And he's arguing that Old Testament narratives are therefore Torah. And remember that that Hebrew word, we often translate it as law, but it really means instruction.

These narratives are therefore instructional. And so the criticism of the theocentric side says, yeah, but our Christ-centered brothers and sisters, when they preach and teach this, they minimize the imperatives. But God's grace doesn't preclude exhortation, does it? You know, you can go through Scripture and find all kinds of places where what God has done for us, and even what he has done for us in Christ, leads to exhortation.

So this is how you ought to live. Abe Caravella takes a similar view. He wants preachers to expound the particulars of the specific text they preach so they can reveal its theology.

What it affirms about God, and the life change for which it calls. So again, he shrewdly labels his approach Christiconic, since it sees each pericope of Scripture, as he describes it, portraying a facet of the image, icon, of Christ. To put it another way, he argues that preaching is Trinitarian.

The text is inspired by the Spirit. It depicts Jesus, the Son, to whose image we are to be conformed. And as we're so conformed, the will of the Father is being done.

So Caravella's concern with the Christocentric approach is that it risks neglecting the specific thrust of individual Old Testament texts. And I agree with him on that. Where I would disagree, and we'll talk about this a little bit more, is that he doesn't see

biblical theology; he doesn't see a place for biblical theology, that is, tracing biblical themes, kind of fitting things into the overall storyline of the Bible.

He doesn't believe that the sermon is a place to do that. We'll talk about that a little bit more. He said, no, preaching is an event where the specific message of a particular text, its divine demand, is explicated, brought to bear in the life of the children of God to transform them for the glory of God.

So that's the theocentric side. Now, in the Christocentric view, or the redemptive historical approach to preaching, the focus is on Jesus, the one to whom all portions of Scripture point. Now, again, there's a rather broad spectrum of Christ-centered approaches to preaching.

And if you hear somebody use these labels, by the way, ask them what they mean, because some people mean different things. That's the problem with labels, isn't it? But Sidney Graydon is representative of this more restrictive Christ-centered approach. He places his approach somewhere between Calvin's theocentric method and Luther's Christological method, although at the end of the day, he's a lot closer to Luther.

He builds his approach on the context in which the Old Testament finds its interpretation, and he says that context is the New Testament. So the issue, then, he says, that confronts preachers is how to preach the incarnate Christ from a book that predates his incarnation by many centuries. This means moving from the Old Testament text that one is preaching to preach Christ.

Now, he does say this move shouldn't be arbitrary, though. We must look for a clue, a feature in the Old Testament text that warrants linking it with a particular New Testament event or one or more New Testament passages. And in his book on Christ-centered preaching from the Old Testament, he identifies seven ways that you can make this move.

And I'm not going to go into detail on them, but just so you're aware of them, he talks about the redemptive historical progression. That's number one. He talks about, secondly, about promise fulfillment.

Third, about typology. Three, analogy. Fifth, longitudinal themes.

Six, contrast. And then seven, New Testament references. And by the way, while I disagree with his overall approach, I do think that some of those are things that we can do.

I'm kind of tipping my hand where I'm going to go. But anyway, those are his seven ways. Now, he does insist that the move to Christ from an Old Testament text must align with the author's intended message.

So he's not dissing authorial intent. And he does argue that the way we discover the message is through rigorous literary, grammatical, and historical analysis. He is an outstanding exegete.

And I've used some of his, like he has *Preaching Christ from Genesis*. He's got *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*, *Preaching Christ from Daniel*. And I've used some of those with profit.

In fact, in his *Preaching Christ from Genesis*, he even quoted some of my work on Genesis 38. And he's just a great exegete. But at the end of the day, I'm afraid that the approach is too restrictive and too, yeah, just fails to deal with the imperative, which I believe is there in most narrative texts.

By the way, he is careful, though, to say, look, it's not anything goes. He says there's been a lot of bad ways of moving from the Old Testament to Christ. In fact, he faulted Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great preacher, for using Old Testament texts as springboards for preaching Christ.

And in his words, he said, traveling through, quote, unquote, the swamp of typologizing and allegorizing, end of quote, to get to Christ rather than through a careful interpretive process. So I think Sidney Graydonis is really one of the best models as to, you know, of those who use this particular approach. Now, the narrowness of his approach surfaces in the application of Old Testament text to New Covenant believers.

For example, he cautions preachers not to present David in 1 Samuel 17 as a model of courage. Instead, he said, the essence of the David-Goliath narrative is that the Lord himself defeats the enemy of his people. And then he says this theme locates the passage on the highway of God's kingdom history, which leads straight to Jesus' victory over Satan.

So the application for today is for God's people to get involved in the battle against the evil one, if prosperity has blinded them to it, and to rely on God who fights for them if they've been relying on their own strength. So that's kind of how Graydonis approaches these things. And he's always looking forward to looking ahead to how does this point forward to what Jesus did in his life here on earth.

By the way, Brian Chappell represents a less restrictive Christ-centered approach, even though he's written a textbook on Christ-centered preaching. He's not leery of preaching the instructions of Scripture, its imperatives as well as its indicatives, as

long as we ground the imperative, that is the command, in the indicative, that is what God has done for us specifically through Christ. His concern is that we preach matters of faith without rooting them in what God has done for us in Christ.

And so at that point we're simply moralizing, we're preaching, be sermons, be good, be faithful, be obedient, but we're not grounding them in the larger story of Scripture. So Chappell tells us we ought to read these narratives with gospel glasses. He says these are not X-ray goggles that make an image or reference to Jesus mysteriously emerge from behind some bush in every biblical account.

Rather, they reflect aspects of God's nature that provide redemption, as well as aspects of human nature that require redemption. Then there's Tim Keller. I love the late Tim Keller.

I've learned so much from him, not only about preaching, but just about ministry. He seems to fall somewhere between Graydonus and Chappell. And I've listened to a lot of Keller sermons, not just on narrative, but on other passages in the Old Testament, and he's very willing to preach the Bible's appeals to holy living.

Yet in addition to doing that, he also wants to focus on what God's done for us in Christ, and he's eager to point out how Jesus is the fulfillment of the major themes, figures, and images in the Bible. That Jesus is the better David, the better Esther, the true king, the just judge. And so for him, the key to preaching Christ is to find out how your particular text fits into the whole context of the Bible and participates as a chapter in the great narrative.

So that's kind of the difference between the theocentric and the Christocentric. So what's the third view? I mentioned I think there are three big views. And the third view, and this is the view that I would hold, is really the mediating view that brings both of these together.

This is the view that Sidney Graydonus argued for in his 1970 doctoral dissertation. Yeah, I recognize the danger in taking a mediating view. Remember, I lived in Montana for almost half of my life, and I spent one summer working on a cattle ranch.

So I like some of the sayings of the Old West, and they're often blunt, and they don't miss words. Here's one of them. One of the sayings is, Yeah, no.

Let me start that again. One of them is, And that speaks to the danger of a mediating view. The idea is, well, you need to make up your mind.

You can't have it both ways. However, I believe we must have it both ways, because I think Scripture teaches us to do both. I believe we must read the Old Testament in its

literary, grammatical, and historic cultural environment to determine its message and its ethical thrust.

We have to do that. But at the same time, I believe we must locate the theology of this text in the larger story of the Bible, the larger storyline of Scripture. That's the concern of biblical theology.

Now, again, labels are fraught with difficulty. Some call this the Christotelic view, acknowledging that Christ is the telos, that's a Greek word, the telos or the goal of the Old Testament. I like the way John Walton says it.

He says, and I think that quote really nails precisely my burden, my concern as I preach these narratives. Christopher Wright, who's a wonderful British Old Testament scholar and has written some good books on preaching, even preaching from the Old Testament, makes a similar point when he says, It all points to Christ, but it's not all about Christ. And I find that distinction really helpful.

All of the Old Testament points forward to Christ. We know that from Luke 24. Jesus himself said that.

But that doesn't mean that every word, every sentence, every detail in a narrative is specifically about Christ. So I'm going to present a process for connecting to the Bible's storyline and its hero, Jesus Christ. We'll talk about this a little bit later here in a later session.

But for now, let me wrap it up this way. Here's my plea to those of you who would identify as, well, I'm theocentric, or I'm strictly Christ-centered. So here are the cautions.

The caution to the theocentric preachers is this. I would remind you that the divine demands of the Old Testament narrative text must always be grounded in what God's done for you in Christ. So what I'm saying is the historical accounts concerning Deborah or Abraham or Ruth or David can't be understood and applied apart from their connection to the metanarrative of the Bible.

And the hero of that narrative is Jesus the Messiah. This is where I differ from my friend Abe Curavella. We've been together at at least one ETS session, Evangelical Theological Society, where we both presented, How Would You Preach 1 Samuel 17? And I have a deep respect for him.

And we've debated another issue as well. And he's even put that on his website. So I have high regard for Dr. Curavella.

But he sees the sermon not as a place for a display of biblical theology, but simply where the message of the specific text is explicated and brought to bear on the life of God's children. But I say this. How can we bring an Old Testament text to bear on the lives of new covenant believers without noting how that theological message in the Old Testament is shaped by the way it finds its fulfillment in Christ? Now, I appreciate Dr. Curavella's concern about how a Christ-centered focus can obscure the specific thrust of an individual Old Testament text.

But if this specific thrust gets swallowed up, in his words, by biblical theology transactions, that's what he says, I think the fault lies with the preacher, not the methodology itself. I think we need to help people see how these individual narratives fit into the larger storyline. It doesn't mean we take ten minutes out of our sermon to do that.

Maybe it's only a couple of minutes. But I think we have to do that. So that's my caution to the theocentric group of preachers.

Here's my caution to Christocentric preachers. Actually, this is Tim Keller's warning. He's a Christ-centered preacher.

But he says that it's possible to get to Christ so quickly in preaching a text that we fail to be sensitive to the particularities of that text message. Another, we leapfrog over the historical realities to get to Jesus as though the Old Testament scriptures had little significance to their original readers. And that really amounts to flattening the text so that every sermon sounds the same, and it overlooks critical topics, whether it's the dignity of work, the value of human life, the way God's people should handle suffering, or the way that leaders should use power.

That's a huge theme in Samuel and even in Kings. So that's one of the dangers. Another danger is to find Christ in details where he's not.

Kevin Van Hooser, a friend of mine, offers this perspective on how Jesus explained to the disciples on the road to Emmaus what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself. Dr. Van Hooser said, I believe this was not a heavy-handed allegorical reading that made use of fanciful connections between incidental details in the life of Christ, but rather an interpretation that discerned the through line. The through line.

I like that. In other words, the central dramatic thrust of divine redemptive history is much in the way that the prophets, priests, and kings anticipate aspects of Christ's own work. I think that's very helpful.

Lucas O'Neill, a fine preacher, refers to these dangers as the twin dangers of missing the text. That is, we fail to honor the details that we're preaching. Secondly, misusing the text.

That is, mishandling the details in order to get to Christ. So, Christ-centric preachers need to remember that Christ-centered preaching shouldn't preclude us from calling the people of God to believe and to behave in a certain way. I strongly disagree with the kind of Christ-centered approach that says, and this is a quote that's quoted favorably by Sidney Gray Donnis in his book.

It's from another author. But the quote is, We do not confront men with Christ by preaching theological ideas, nor by ethical exhortations, but by rehearsing the saving events witnessed in Scripture. And I'm sorry, but I don't buy that.

We do confront people with Christ by preaching theological ideas, ethical exhortations, and grounding those in the saving events witnessed in Scripture. I think that approach is really reductionistic. So, as you think about preaching these Old Testament narratives, I don't think we ought to pit a theocentric approach against a Christocentric approach.

I think the former, the theocentric, should lead to the latter, the Christocentric. And I think the latter, the Christocentric, ought to build on the former, the theocentric. Let me wrap it up with this.

A few years ago, D.A. Carson, Dr. Don Carson, a fine New Testament scholar, was being interviewed by R.C. Sproul about how New Testament writers worked with biblical theological categories. And I thought it was fascinating because he said that some preachers, when they first start out, will preach Old Testament narrative text. They'll read it and say, "Well, David did this, so you ought to do this.

David didn't do this, so don't be bad, don't do that. And he says, then they learn all of these theological trajectories, biblical theological trajectories, and categories, and they start following those. Maybe it's the Davidic dynasty.

Of course, Dr. Carson would say the Davidic dynasty. But he said they start tracing these trajectories and these themes from the Old Testament to the New. He says, and then they forget about the moral categories.

He said they forget that the writer of James could say, Elijah was a man like us, and he prayed, and we ought to pray as well. And I thought that was fascinating because D.A. Carson is usually considered a Christ-centered preacher, and he is big on making sure that we preach the gospel. But even he says, look, look at the way the New Testament writers preached.

We don't have to reduce our sermons to doing one thing. There are several things that we're doing as we preach these. So that's what's kind of behind my mediating approach.

All right, we're ready now to get to work. In our next session, we are going to talk about how to read and how to study an Old Testament narrative text.

This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in his series on preaching Old Testament narratives. This is session number two, the Christ-centered preaching debate.