

Dr. Steven D. Mathewson
Preaching Old Testament Narratives,
Session 2, Study Guide:
The Christ-Centered Preaching Debate

Abstract:

Dr. Steven D. Mathewson explores the scholarly tension regarding how to interpret and teach **Old Testament narratives**, using a sports analogy to illustrate how different coaching philosophies yield different results. The discussion centers on the **Christ-centered preaching debate**, specifically contrasting the **exemplary approach**, which treats biblical figures as moral models, with the **redemptive historical approach**, which views every story as a pointer toward Jesus. Mathewson examines the history of this conflict within the **Dutch Reformed tradition** and critiques the work of **Sidney Greidanus**, who shifted from a balanced perspective to a more restrictive Christological view over time. To navigate these extremes, the author proposes a **mediating position** that respects both the **theocentric** focus of a specific text and its connection to the broader **biblical storyline**. He argues that effective teaching must maintain the **ethical thrust** of the original narrative while grounding those moral commands in the redemptive work of Christ. Ultimately, the source encourages practitioners to avoid **moralistic flattening** or excessive allegorizing in favor of a comprehensive, **Trinitarian** understanding of Scripture.

Briefing Document:

The Christ-Centered Preaching Debate: Strategies for Old Testament Narratives
 Executive Summary

The "Christ-Centered Preaching Debate" concerns the methodology for interpreting and preaching Old Testament (OT) narratives. At its core, the debate explores whether these historical texts should be used primarily as moral examples (the Exemplary approach), as revelations of God's character (the Theocentric approach), or as pointers toward the person and work of Jesus Christ (the Redemptive Historical or Christocentric approach). This briefing document outlines the historical origins of the controversy, primarily rooted in the Dutch Reformed churches prior to World War II, and examines the strengths and weaknesses of the major modern frameworks. The analysis concludes that a mediating path—one that preserves the specific ethical thrust of a text while locating it within the

Bible's larger redemptive storyline—is the most faithful way to preach Old Testament narratives to a New Covenant audience.

Historical Origins: The Dutch Controversy

The contemporary debate finds a significant entry point in a controversy that raged within the Reformed churches of Holland during the 1930s and 1940s.

- **The Dispute:** Preachers disagreed on how to handle "historical texts" (OT narratives). One group used an "exemplary approach," treating biblical figures as models to imitate or avoid. The opposing side argued for a "redemptive historical approach," focusing on how stories point to Christ.
 - **The Interruption:** The German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940 and the subsequent occupation until 1945 effectively halted the academic controversy. A post-war church schism further delayed the discussion.
 - **The Resurrection of the Debate:** In 1970, Dr. Sidney Greidanus revisited this controversy in his doctoral dissertation, *Sola Scriptura*, offering a critique of both sides and proposing a model for preaching.
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Primary Preaching Methodologies

The source context categorizes the various approaches into three "big buckets": the Exemplary, the Redemptive Historical (Christocentric), and the Theocentric approaches.

1. The Exemplary Approach

This method treats biblical characters as moral pedagogical examples.

- **Mechanism:** It views characters like David or Abraham as types to be emulated (e.g., "be like David") or avoided (e.g., "don't be like David").
- **Scriptural Basis:**
 - **1 Corinthians 10:** Paul cites God's judgment on Israel as "examples" (*tupoi*) for believers.
 - **Hebrews 11:** The "Hall of Faith" presents Old Testament figures as models of faith.
 - **James 5:** The author points to Elijah's prayer life as a man "just like us."
- **Critique:** Opponents argue this approach leads to "fragmentary interpretation," reading the Bible as a mere collection of biographies rather than a unified revelation.

2. The Redemptive Historical (Christocentric) Approach

This approach argues that the specific purpose of OT narratives is the revelation of God coming to the world in Christ.

- **Mechanism:** Preachers seek the "trajectory" from the OT text to the person/work of Christ.
- **The Greidanus Model:** In his later work, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (1999), Greidanus identified seven ways to move from the OT to Christ:
 1. Redemptive historical progression.
 2. Promise-fulfillment.

3. Typology.
 4. Analogy.
 5. Longitudinal themes.
 6. Contrast.
 7. New Testament references.
- **Variation (Brian Chappell):** Chappell advocates for a less restrictive approach, using "gospel glasses" to see how texts reflect God's nature that provides redemption or human nature that requires it. He insists on grounding "imperatives" (commands) in "indicatives" (what God has done).
 - **Variation (Tim Keller):** Keller emphasizes that Jesus is the "true and better" version of OT figures (e.g., the better David, the true king).

3. The Theocentric Approach

Rooted in the tradition of John Calvin, this approach focuses on what the text reveals about God's character and actions.

- **Mechanism:** It prioritizes the author's original intent and the theological message regarding God's work in history.
- **Calvin vs. Luther:** While Martin Luther favored a strictly Christological exegesis, Calvin believed theocentric preaching was "implicitly Christ-centered" and sufficient on its own.
- **Modern Representatives:**
 - **Dr. Ken Langley:** Argues that the agenda of OT narrative is theological, and over-focusing on human deeds misses the point.
 - **Dr. Abraham Kuruvilla:** Uses the term "Christiconic." He argues that each pericope portrays a facet of the "image" (*icon*) of Christ to which believers are to be conformed.

Key Tensions and Challenges

The debate highlights several critical risks inherent in choosing one methodology exclusively.

Risk Factor	Christocentric Danger	Theocentric/Exemplary Danger
Handling the Text	"Flattening" the text: Making every sermon sound the same by leaping to Jesus too quickly.	Moralizing: Reducing the text to a "to-do list" or self-improvement manual.
Details	Misusing details: Using fanciful allegories or "magical lines" to find Jesus where he isn't.	Missing the Metanarrative: Treating stories in isolation from the overall story of the Bible.
Application	Suppressing Imperatives: Neglecting the Bible's calls to holy living and ethical behavior.	Neglecting Grace: Failing to ground moral demands in the work of Christ.

The Mediating Path: A Synthesis

A proposed "way forward" involves a mediating view that combines the strengths of the various approaches. This view is based on the principle that while the Old Testament *points* to Christ, it is not always *about* Christ in every detail.

Core Tenets of the Mediating View

- **Fidelity to Original Context:** Preachers must use literary, grammatical, and historical analysis to determine the text's specific message and ethical thrust.
- **Biblical Theology Integration:** The specific theology of a text should be located within the larger storyline of Scripture (the "through line").
- **Instruction as "Torah":** OT narratives should be viewed as *Torah* (instruction), delivering prophetic messages and telling God's people how to live.
- **Grounding the Imperative:** Ethical exhortations must be grounded in the saving events of Scripture. As D.A. Carson notes, preachers should not abandon "moral categories" even when they learn "theological trajectories."

Conclusion

As summarized by scholar Christopher Wright, the Old Testament "all points to Christ, but it's not all about Christ." Faithful preaching requires a dual focus: honoring the particularity of the Old Testament text and its original ethical demands while simultaneously showing how those demands find their ultimate meaning and fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Christ-Centered Preaching Debate

This study guide explores the theological and homiletical debate surrounding the preaching of Old Testament narratives, as presented by Dr. Steven D. Mathewson in "Preaching Old Testament Narratives, Session 2."

Part 1: Short Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. What historical event in the Dutch Reformed churches serves as the entry point for the debate on preaching Old Testament narratives?
2. Define the "exemplary approach" to preaching Old Testament stories.
3. What is the core argument of the "redemptive historical approach"?
4. According to the text, why did the controversy in the Dutch Reformed churches cease in the 1940s, and when did it resurface?

5. How do the two sides of the debate interpret the Greek word *tupoi* in 1 Corinthians 10?
6. What is the "theocentric view" of preaching, and which historical figure is it most closely associated with?
7. Describe Abraham Kuruvilla's "Christiconic" view and how Dr. Mathewson characterizes it.
8. What does Dr. Mathewson identify as the "twin dangers" for Christocentric preachers?
9. How does Christopher Wright distinguish between the Old Testament's relationship to Christ and its specific content?
10. According to Luke 24, as cited in the text, what are the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible that Jesus claimed pointed to himself?

Part 2: Quiz Answer Key

1. Prior to World War II, a controversy raged in the Reformed churches in Holland regarding how to preach "historical texts." This debate pitted those who saw biblical characters as models to imitate against those who believed the texts should primarily point to the work of Christ.
2. The exemplary approach treats Old Testament characters as moral models to either imitate or avoid, such as David's faith or his failures. This method often relies on New Testament passages like Hebrews 11 or James's reference to Elijah to justify using historical figures as pedagogical examples.
3. The redemptive historical approach argues that the specific purpose of Old Testament narratives is to reveal God's coming to the world in Christ. Proponents of this view oppose the exemplary approach, calling it a "fragmentary interpretation" that incorrectly treats the Bible as a mere collection of biographies.
4. The controversy was interrupted by the German invasion and occupation of the Netherlands from 1940 to 1945, which made carrying on the debate difficult. It did not resurface for 25 years until Sidney Graydonis revisited the controversy in his 1970 doctoral dissertation.
5. Exemplary preachers translate *tupoi* as pedagogical "examples" for believers to follow. In contrast, redemptive historical preachers argue the word refers to "types" or prefigurations of events in the Messianic Age rather than moral lessons.
6. The theocentric view is a God-centered approach that focuses on what the text teaches about God's character and actions. It is rooted in the tradition of John Calvin, who believed that exposing the author's theological intent was "implicitly Christ-centered" without needing to force a connection to Jesus in every text.
7. Kuruvilla's view argues that each pericope portrays a facet of the "icon" (image) of Christ to which believers are to be conformed. Dr. Mathewson suggests this is essentially a theocentric view with a "clever" name that avoids a strictly Christ-centered methodology while keeping Christ in the title.
8. Christocentric preachers risk "missing the text" by failing to honor the specific details and historical realities of the passage. They also risk "misusing the text" by

employing heavy-handed allegorical readings to find Christ in incidental details where he is not intended to be found.

9. Christopher Wright states that while the Old Testament "all points to Christ," it is "not all about Christ." This distinction allows for the text to have its own specific message and ethical thrust while still fitting into the larger storyline of redemption.
10. Jesus identified the three divisions as the Law of Moses (Torah), the Prophets (Nevi'im), and the Psalms (representing the Ketuvim, or Writings). He explained to his disciples that everything written in these three sections had to be fulfilled in him.

Part 3: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. Compare and contrast the early (1970) "mediating position" of Sidney Graydonis with his later (1999) "strict Christ-centered approach." Explain why Dr. Mathewson finds the earlier position more helpful for faithful preaching.
2. Analyze the role of New Testament "imperatives" and "indicatives" in the preaching debate. How does Brian Chappell suggest these two categories should be balanced when applying Old Testament narratives to a modern audience?
3. Evaluate the "theocentric" critique of Christ-centered preaching. Specifically, address the concern that a focus on Christ-centeredness might suppress the ethical demands and practical instructions contained within Old Testament narratives.
4. Discuss the significance of the "Tanakh" structure in understanding Jesus's own hermeneutic, as presented in the Road to Emmaus account in Luke 24. How does this biblical foundation influence both sides of the Christ-centered preaching debate?
5. Explain Dr. Mathewson's preferred "mediating view." Detail how a preacher can honor the "through line" of redemptive history while still respecting the literary, grammatical, and historic-cultural particularities of an individual Old Testament text.

Part 4: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Christiconic	An approach suggested by Abraham Kuruvilla where each biblical text portrays a facet of the "icon" or image of Christ to which the Spirit conforms the believer.
Christocentric	Also known as the "redemptive historical approach," this focus prioritizes how every portion of Scripture points toward the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Christotelic	A view acknowledging that Christ is the <i>telos</i> (end or goal) of the Old Testament, even if every individual sentence is not specifically about him.
Exemplary Approach	A method of preaching that looks at biblical characters as moral examples or models to be imitated (if good) or avoided (if bad).
Ketuvim	The "Writings," the third division of the Hebrew Bible; often abbreviated or represented by "the Psalms" in the New Testament.
Logos	The Word; the person of Christ who has been active from the beginning of history.
Nevi'im	The "Prophets," the second division of the Hebrew Bible, containing both the "Former Prophets" (historical narratives like Joshua and Kings) and the "Latter Prophets."
Pericope	A specific passage or unit of Scripture being expounded in a sermon.
Tanakh	An acronym for the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible: T orah (Law), N evi'im (Prophets), and K etuvim (Writings).
Telos	A Greek word meaning "end," "goal," or "purpose."
Theocentric	A God-centered approach to Scripture that focuses on what a text affirms about the nature, will, and actions of God.
Torah	A Hebrew word often translated as "Law," but more accurately meaning "instruction."
Tupoi	The plural of the Greek word <i>tupos</i> ; interpreted as pedagogical "examples" by some and as "types" or prefigurations of Christ by others.