

An Answer to the Challenge of Preaching the Old Testament: An Historical and Theological Examination of the Redemptive-Historical Approach

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INTRODUCTION

All honest exegetes will readily admit that preaching from the Old Testament is a difficult task. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Reformed church in the 20th Century witnessed a debate regarding how to properly exegete and preach the texts of the Old Testament. This debate continues to rage in early parts of the 21st Century. Included among the methods of approaching the Old Testament which emerged from this debate was the redemptive-historical approach. This approach has significantly impacted the Reformed debate regarding how to preach the Old Testament.

The purpose of this article is two-fold: (1) To trace and explain the historical and theological development of the redemptive-historical approach as it emerged in the Netherlands; (2) To explore and synthesize the core

principles of this approach by examining the writings of several of its most prominent advocates.

Before commencing our pursuit of this two-fold purpose, it will be helpful to set the stage by providing a brief historical overview of the challenge of preaching from the Old Testament. This challenge, which gave rise to the redemptive-historical approach, is not new, but rather stretches back to the very beginning of the Christian era.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

“And the first question that confronts the interpreter is that of the relation in which the Old and New Testaments stand to each other.”¹

Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) penned these words in the context of articulating the principles which compose the foundation of sound biblical interpretation and exegesis. It is unequivocal, based on the substance of Berkhof’s quotation, that he considered the relationship between the Old and New Testaments as a primary question in hermeneutics. It is a primary question because the answer to it impacts the entire scope of one’s theology, particularly how one approaches and exegetes the Old Testament.

Berkhof’s question is not a novel one. Interpreting the Old Testament has been a struggle for exegetes throughout church history. For example, in the early church theologians were divided over the issue of how to preach from the Old Testament. Some early church fathers employed an allegorical approach to the Old Testament. The church father Origen (185–254) is a prime example of one who adopted this approach. Origen considered the Bible as containing a mystery which is revealed through a complex system of symbolism.² Other church fathers, such as John Chrysostom

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1. Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950) 134.

2. Robert M. Grand and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984) 59.

(347–407), were committed to expounding the historical and literal meaning of the Old Testament and avoided allegorizing the text.³ The allegorical and literal-historical approaches to the Old Testament competed for the minds of exegetes throughout the patristic and medieval periods.⁴

During the Reformation and Post-Reformation periods, the Reformers and their theological progeny generally rejected the allegorical approach and instead embraced the literal and historical approach, but the Reformers placed an even greater emphasis on the use of the original languages.⁵ Some Reformation exegetes, like John Calvin, employed a typological hermeneutic when interpreting the Old Testament which focused on the glory of Christ, but avoided most of the excesses of unwarranted and fanciful allegory.⁶ However, even during this glorious period of exegesis, many exegetes continued to interpret the Old Testament in an overly simplistic typological manner choosing to focus on identifying remote references and allusions to Christ in the Old Testament.⁷

The next major development in the interpretation of the Old Testament occurred in the 19th Century with the work of Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918). He, and his intellectual progeny, set a pattern for interpreting the Old Testament which remains the predominate methodology employed among modern liberal theologians (Grand and Tracy, 116). Wellhausen's view of the Old Testament was humanistic and naturalistic, rather than theocentric and supernatural, and he understood the Old Testament as a composite work written from four different textual traditions.⁸ Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), like Wellhausen, viewed the Old Testament in a naturalistic manner, but Gunkel chose to focus on the form and genre of Old Testament literature as a method of exegesis and interpretation.⁹

Certainly, the history of Old Testament exegesis is much broader and deeper than this brief sketch suggests. However, this overview is more than sufficient to reveal that the challenge of interpreting the Old Testament is not a new one. The question that remains is how will the Christian exegete respond to the challenge of the Old Testament? More poignantly and practically, how will he preach the Old Testament? Should he take an allegorical or typological approach? Should he take a Christological approach? Should he take a grammatico-historical approach? Should he take a multi-perspectival approach? The very presence and difficulty of these questions has led to an unfortunate neglect of preaching from the Old Testament. Many pastors simply avoid preaching from the Old Testament rather than dealing

with its inherent complexities. Why is preaching from the Old Testament so difficult?

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. attempted to answer this question by stating that the main difficulty in preaching from the Old Testament is “the Bible’s historical particularity; that is, its words are most frequently, if not always in the Old Testament, directed to a specific people in a specific situation at a specific time and in a specific culture. That is the real difficulty” (Kaiser, 37). What Kaiser is articulating is that the difficulty which the exegete faces in preaching from the Old Testament is bridging the historical-cultural gap which necessarily exists in Old Testament interpretation. The exegete must determine how he will bridge this gap; he simply cannot ignore it.

The debate over how to bridge this gap led to a controversy within the Gereformeerde Kerken in Holland in the 1930’s and 1940’s which eventually contributed to a church schism. This conflict, and the literature and study it spawned, gave rise to the modern development

3. Ibid., 66. It should also be noted that even in the early church period there were those engaged in what we now commonly refer to as Biblical Theology. Although many consider the discipline of Biblical Theology to have its formal birth in the 19th Century, on a practical and informal level it has always been with the church. J.V. Fesko has ably argued that the church father Irenaeus (115–202) was a biblical theologian (see J.V. Fesko, “On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology,” *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2008) 443–477.

4. Traditionally, most scholars contended that there were two different schools of interpretation in the early church period—the Alexandrian school (emphasizing the allegorical approach) and the Antiochian school (emphasizing the historical-literal approach). This traditional understanding has been ably challenged in recent scholarship (see Donald Fairbairn, “Patristic Exegesis and Theology: The Cart and the Horse,” *Westminster Theological Journal* (2007), 1–19). Fairbairn contends that the differences in exegetical emphases between Antioch and Alexandria were primarily the result of each school’s theological response to the heresy of Arianism. I am indebted to Rev. James Cassidy for enlightening me regarding this scholarly advancement.

5. Grand and Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 92.

6. J.V. Fesko provides a short, but helpful summary of Calvin’s biblical theological approach in “On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology.”

7. Grand and Tracy, 93. For example, Martin Luther is often criticized for taking an overly simplistic Christological approach to the Old Testament.

8. Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 40–41. Wellhausen advocated a form of higher criticism which was concerned with the source of biblical literature.

9. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 40.

and articulation of the redemptive-historical approach to the Old Testament.¹⁰

THE HISTORY OF THE CONFLICT IN THE
GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN

It is interesting that the modern Reformed debate regarding how to preach from the Old Testament finds its origin in the small country of Holland. It was within the Reformed church of the Netherlands, in the early part of the past century, that a debate arose over the proper methodology for preaching from the Old Testament. Sidney Greidanus, professor emeritus at Calvin Theological Seminary, has provided the best historical summary of this controversy in his book *Sola Scriptura*.¹¹ Greidanus summarizes the genesis of the controversy as follows:

In the 1930's a number of men in the Gereformeerde Kerken raised objections to the usual practice of preaching in that church. Simply put, their complaint was that the preachers, in preaching historical texts, would display the persons mentioned in the texts as models to be imitated, as examples to be followed—hence the term 'exemplary preaching' (Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 8).

The Old Testament, in which historical narratives predominate, is particularly subject to being treated in an exemplary manner and therefore much of the debate revolved around how to preach the Old Testament.

In order to properly understand the controversy in the Netherlands it is important to gain some perspective on the political, philosophical and theological climate of the period. On the political front, it is important to realize that this controversy arose in the period between

10. As has been noted in the brief historical sketch provided in this article, what we now refer to as Biblical Theology or the Redemptive-Historical approach has been with the church since the dawn of the New Testament era. However, it is my contention that the controversy in the Netherlands was the genesis event for the modern development of the approach and also served to fuel the modern debate over how to preach the Old Testament in the Reformed church.

11. Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura* (Toronto, Canada: Wedge Publishing, 1970).

12. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 32. Barth's influence on the development of the redemptive-historical approach should not be underestimated. In many ways, the redemptive-historical approach is a direct answer to Barth because it emphasizes the supernatural work of God in redemption and centers this redemptive work in a real unfolding of history.

13. Not to be confused with Herman Bavinck.

14. Greidanus credits Klaas Schilder as pioneering this attack against Barthianism (see Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 30.)

two World Wars, both of which impacted the European continent in an extraordinary manner. In addition, it was during this period that a new Calvinistic philosophy was developed by Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven (Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 23). In the arena of theology, Herman Bavinck's (1854–1921) theological contributions and legacy, emphasizing the importance of Reformed exegesis and dogmatics, began to influence a generation of scholars and pastors thereby reviving a love for the classic doctrines of the Reformed faith (Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 25).

A second theological figure of great import also arose during this period who was antithetical to Bavinck, but no less influential—Karl Barth (1886–1968). Barth's dialectic theology, which was built on a non-historical approach to God and the Scriptures, spurred on the minds of theological conservatives to formulate a supernatural response to Barth which fused supernatural redemption with real history.¹²

The confluence of these factors led to what Greidanus calls a "new direction" in the Reformed church in Holland. This "new direction" is difficult to fully articulate and define, but J. H. Bavinck¹³ attempted to give it some contours:

We can speak of a 'new spirit' or a 'new direction'. . . . In the totality of our church life in which various elements of earlier pietism and mystical subjectivism persist, this new spirit reveals itself as a rejuvenating and disquieting force (Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 22).

This "new direction" also impacted the study and teaching of homiletics where those embracing change sought a "new method of interpretation and preaching" (Greidanus, 27). This new approach to preaching was labeled the redemptive-historical approach. In direct contradiction to Barth's ahistorical approach; the Reformed preachers in Holland were embracing the realness of redemptive history in their preaching by means of this new method.¹⁴ This new direction had returned vitality to the church in Holland, but it also brought complications.

The introduction of the "new direction," and all of the change which accompanied it, left many in the church of Holland feeling unsettled. During the Synod of 1936, a committee was appointed to investigate and report on the substance and nature of this "new direction." Greidanus notes that this committee was replete with conflict and had little success in achieving its appointed task (Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 25). Powerful personalities were emerging and a cleavage was developing between

two major groups. The stage was set for the blossoming of a controversy.¹⁵

Before dissecting the heart of the controversy, it will be helpful to obtain some understanding of the players on each side of the argument and the general substance of their respective positions. We will begin with the advocates of the redemptive-historical approach.

Greidanus includes the following names as a list of men who represented the redemptive-historical approach: B. Holwerda, K. Schilder, H.J. Spier, D. Van Dijk, M.B. Van't Veer and C. Veenhof.¹⁶ Greidanus notes that, among these men, Schilder was the most prominent and he "might be called the initiator of the redemptive-historical approach" (Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 40). J. Faber described Schilder's influence on this movement as follows:

Schilder showed the coherence and connections in Holy Scripture. His work caused the formation of a school of mostly young Reformed ministers and led to the renewal of the preaching of the Word in an inspiring manner. This labor reached a summit in 1930 with the publication of *Christus in Zijn Lijden* (Christ and His Suffering), a trilogy that was ably translated into English.¹⁷

The position for which Schilder was the torchbearer was summarized succinctly by one of his comrades, Holwerda:

The Bible does not contain many histories but *one* history—the one history of God's constantly advancing revelation, the one history of God's ever progressing redemptive work. And the various persons named in the Bible have all received their own peculiar place in this one history and have their peculiar meaning for this history. We must, therefore, try to understand all the accounts in their relation to each other, in their coherence with the center of redemptive history, Jesus Christ (Faber, 41).

As Greidanus points out, the goal of the redemptive-historical approach is to achieve *sola Scriptura* in preaching.¹⁸ For the advocates of the redemptive-historical approach, the principle of *sola Scriptura* is violated when Scripture is reduced solely to moralistic, or exemplary, instruction. This is especially at issue when preaching from historical narratives of the Old Testament. Van Dijk, a proponent of the redemptive-historical approach, captured the essence of this concern when he wrote, "No justice is done to Scripture when the deeds of persons who figured once upon a time in a particular

historical episode occasion some stimulating, warning, or edifying remarks in the sermon" (Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 42). Van Dijk goes on to conclude, "It is my conviction that exemplary treatment of historical texts cannot rightly be called 'ministry of the Word'" (42).

The second position is the exemplary approach and Greidanus lists the following as advocates of this approach: J.H. Bavinck, K. Dijk, J. Douma, Ph. J. Huyser, J. Schelhaas, and N. Streefkerk (42). Greidanus judiciously notes that these men did not defend the gross extremes of the exemplary approach, but rather they were advocates for a balanced approach which had room for what they considered a proper use of Scripture, namely an exemplary or moralistic application (43). J. Douma attempted to express the balanced view of his side and its historic validity:

Our fathers knew very well that redemptive history is a unified structure with Christ at its center, but they still felt free to treat separately (using biblical givens) certain persons described in Scripture, to picture them psychologically, to speak of their struggles and trials, their strengths and weaknesses, and then to draw parallels between the experiences of the Bible saints and the struggles of believers today. Without any hesitation our fathers held up the virtues of the biblical persons as an example to all, but also their sins and weaknesses as a warning (Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 43).

After reading Douma's statement, one might wonder whether a conflict exists at all between these two views. After all, the exemplary approach appears to have no conflict with the fundamental nature of the redemptive-

15. Greidanus notes that the exemplary—redemptive-historical conflict was not the only area of disagreement within the church of Holland. It would be overly simplistic to place the schism entirely on this issue. Greidanus points out other areas of disagreement including subjectivism, individualism and spiritualism. However, the preaching issue became the focus of this schism. See Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 33–39.

16. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 40. For more information on some of these men, and their historic role in this controversy, see C. Trimp, *Preaching and the History of Salvation: Continuing an Unfinished Discussion*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Photolithographed in Korea, Distributed by Westminster Discount Book Service, Inc., Scarsdale, N.Y., translation copyrighted by Nelson D. Kloosterman, 1996) 75–91.

17. J. Faber, "Klaas Schilder's Life and Work", *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder*, ed. J. Geertsema (Philipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 1995) 6.

18. It is important to note that Greidanus is not accusing those maintaining the exemplary approach as denying the inspiration and authority of Scripture. He is not using *sola Scriptura* here in the Reformation sense.

historical approach, but rather only seeks to conjoin to it the liberty to preach in an exemplary manner as well (43). For example, Douma, an ardent defender of the exemplary approach, admits that his group is seeking a synthesis of the two approaches, “Not one of us is opposed to the redemptive-historical method as such; what we object to is the *exclusive* redemptive-historical method” (45). Therefore, as Greidanus rightly recognized, the true debate is not exemplary versus redemptive-historical, but rather the exemplary-redemptive-historical synthesis versus the redemptive-historical approach.¹⁹ This is really what rests at the heart of the Dutch preaching controversy.

These two approaches, with their respective defenders, battled it out for the minds of Reformed preachers in Holland for nearly a decade. The controversy which began in the early 1930’s began to dwindle around 1940 and reached its “low point” after 1944 (50). The decline in the controversy was mainly due to the invasion of Holland by Germany in May of 1940 (50). However, even after the debate had ceased the church in Holland continued to feel the lasting effects of this controversy. A watershed event during this period was Klaas Schilder’s suspension on March 23, 1944 and his subsequent excommunication on August 3, 1944.²⁰ This

19. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 45. Greidanus goes into a discussion of how these two views play out in theory and in practice. He notes that the synthesis approach plays itself out in practice as an exemplary method. See pages 45–49.

20. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 51. It should be noted that, according to J. Faber, Schilder’s excommunication was not simply over the issue of hermeneutics, but occurred ostensibly because “he opposed the doctrinal statements of 1942 (concerning covenant and baptism, presumed regeneration, and ‘common grace’) and because he opposed the hierarchical actions of the synods held in 1939–43 and 1943–45.” See Faber, “Klaas Schilder’s Life and Work,” 2.

21. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 51–52. Greidanus admits that the divide did not fit “neatly” into these two categories, but the main advocates in each movement ended up in different churches.

22. One might wonder why Geerhardus Vos’ name is not included in this list as he is often associated with this movement. It would, in some sense, be anachronistic to include Vos in this movement because he died in 1949 and his life and work was completed prior to this controversy reaching maturity. However, it is clear that Vos’ writings and preaching style would be consistent and supportive of the redemptive-historical approach. In addition, Vos’ contributions to Biblical Theology are so significant they would require an entirely separate article.

23. See “About the Author” in Trimp, *Preaching and the History of Salvation: Continuing an Unfinished Discussion*.

24. C. Trimp, *Preaching and the History of Salvation: Continuing an Unfinished Discussion*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman.

25. See Trimp’s preface.

26. In this section, Trimp also discusses the contributions of Schilder, Holwerda and van’t Veer.

action precipitated the official schism which occurred on August 11, 1944 (51). The Gereformeerde Kerken was now divided and the division centered on the method of preaching Old Testament texts. As Greidanus stated, “the redemptive-historical and exemplary camps had become two churches.”²¹

The debate over how to preach from Old Testament historical texts did not die in Holland. Rather, this debate has continued to foment and is a contemporary issue in Reformed churches and seminaries in America today. The next section of this article, the main body of it, is an attempt to examine and synthesize the core principles of the redemptive-historical approach to the Old Testament.

THE REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL APPROACH ARTICULATED

The best way to understand the core principles of the redemptive-historical approach to the Old Testament is to examine the writings of some of the major figures in this movement. This article will focus on the writings and thought of C. Trimp, S.G. DeGraaf, Sidney Greidanus, Edmund Clowney, and Graeme Goldsworthy.²²

Due to the fact that this controversy emerged from Dutch theology, it should not be surprising that some of those who succeeded the players in the original controversy would be in the Dutch Reformed church both in the Netherlands and in the immigrant church in America. Three significant figures from this background include C. Trimp, S.G. DeGraaf, and Sidney Greidanus.

C. Trimp

C. Trimp was a professor at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands where he taught on numerous subjects including homiletics. He was also an ordained minister and coeditor of a popular Reformed magazine in the Netherlands entitled *De Reformatie*.²³ His primary contribution to this discussion is his short work entitled, *Preaching and the History of Salvation: Continuing an Unfinished Discussion*.²⁴ Trimp entitled his work as he did because he considered the “discussion” which occurred in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands between 1930 and 1944 to be unfinished.²⁵ In this work, Trimp sets forth a definition of the nature of biblical history and a description of the history of salvation. He also makes a plea and apology for redemptive-historical preaching.²⁶

At the end of the first section of his book, Trimp introduces the following topic which is pertinent to the purpose of this article: “The New Testament congregation reads the Old Testament” (Trimp, 34). It is within this section that Trimp sets out several core principles of his approach to preaching from the Old Testament. First among these principles is that the Old Testament reveals God’s relationship with his people in history. He stresses the fact that God “did not consider it beneath His dignity to connect *His* Name to the names and life stories of these people” (35). In fact, Trimp concludes that “Every Old Testament story as such typifies God’s desire to dwell with people and to be involved with people” (Trimp, 36).

A second principle of Trimp’s approach is that Old Testament history is not static, but rather it progresses dynamically “toward the incarnation” (36). He considered this insight as the greatest contribution of the redemptive-historical movement which occurred in the Netherlands. According to Trimp, the redemptive-historical movement emphasized “that the Old Testament showed a *forward-moving impulse*” (Trimp, 64–65). Trimp noted that the Old Testament reveals God as making and fulfilling promises in history in various “dimensions” or epochs (64–65). Trimp conceived of a building block approach to redemptive history wherein each epoch, with its promises and fulfillments, is the foundation for the subsequent epoch and he illustrated this concept through the metaphor of a tall building with its successive stories (64–65).

Thirdly, Trimp advocated a Christocentric approach to preaching the Old Testament because he argued that it is in Christ that “all stories find their meaning” (37). According to Trimp, Christ occupies the center of Old Testament revelation and history. He articulated this principle as follows, “When the typical character of God’s administration is in view, then Scripture argues on the basis of the Old Testament in terms of the unity of history and its center is Christ” (38).

Finally, Trimp considered it vital to understand the legitimate discontinuities between the old and new covenants (38). He believed that a failure to understand these legitimate discontinuities could lead to Judaistic legalism. While he viewed the Old and New Testaments as interconnected, Trimp also considered the incarnation as a significant dividing point in the history of redemption (38). He maintained that the New Testament “brings the Old Testament dispensation to its rest” and that “The Old Testament cannot possibly be understood apart from the New Testament, and the New cannot be read apart from the Old” (37).

Trimp believed that these core principles must compose the theoretical backbone of the exegete’s approach to the Old Testament. However, Trimp argued that in order to move from theory to the practice of preaching the preacher must employ typology (Trimp, 66). He defined typology as follows, “Characteristic of typology is attention to analogies and structural similarities evident between institutions, persons or events of an earlier era and those of a later period” (66). Trimp understood typology as an historical concept which journeys “along the horizontal line of history” (66). For Trimp, typology was inextricably wedded to the progressive advance of redemptive history. He insisted that the progressive unfolding of the redemptive plan, expressed in typology, must be the paradigm which controls the exegete’s interpretation of the Old Testament:

So we may not suffice with explaining an Old Testament story simply by examining its connection to the time preceding the text or to the surrounding milieu within which the story occurred. We must also explain the narrative texts in a way that honors their ‘forward motion’—which is to say: according to the Bible’s own character (Trimp, 69).

This is the essence of Trimp’s approach to preaching from the Old Testament.

Trimp considered the redemptive-historical approach as the best method to express in preaching what he described in theory. He defined the characteristics of redemptive-historical preaching as follows:

‘Redemptive-historical’ preaching is based on respect for this broad context of God’s activity. To preach redemptive-historically is to preach in such a way that the interpretation of the text inherently drives the congregation to Christ and the Spirit, who establish and complete God’s work begun in the old dispensation (Trimp, 73).

Trimp believed this approach would act as a prophylactic against “numerous mistakes” in preaching (Trimp, 94). The following list represents a sampling of the errors which Trimp hoped to avoid by means of the redemptive-historical method: 1) **Allegory** – Trimp described this approach as “cheap, superficial typology based on details in the story”; 2) **Moralism** – which Trimp considered as “aiming the message along subjective, individualistic or psychological lines”; 3) **Misuse of Scripture** – Trimp described this approach as “the inclination to use the Bible to illustrate what we already know from philosophy or ethics, or to illustrate our

aspirations in the arenas of politics, morality or mysticism"; 4) **Denigration of Scripture** – he argued that this approach resulted in “denigrating biblical history to a picture book illuminating mystical or doctrinal truths” (94).

It should be noted that while Trimp denounced the excesses of the exemplary approach to the Old Testament, he did make some room for the legitimate use of example with regard to Old Testament characters. However, Trimp contended that the example must be found in the typological nature of the story. For example, Trimp stated, “if the sermon is dealing with a theme like faith or prayer, then such a sermon may well be illustrated with a historical reference (Heb. 11 and James 5).”²⁷

Trimp advocated a redemptive-historical approach to the Old Testament because he considered it as the only method which adequately recognized the forward moving history of salvation which culminated in the person and work of Christ. By means of typology, properly understood, Trimp believed the Reformed preacher could effectively preach Christ from the Old Testament while avoiding the misuse and abuse of the Scripture.

S.G. De Graaf

The next advocate of the redemptive-historical approach to be examined is S.G. De Graaf (1889–1955). De Graaf was a well known preacher in Amsterdam.²⁸ He was very interested and concerned with the teaching of Bible stories, particularly Old Testament stories, in Sunday schools and in Christian schools (De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, 11). De Graaf noted that he became interested in this topic as a result of his conversations with Christian educators, “In these conversations the teachers repeatedly sought guidance on the practical implementation of the principles I was defending, especially for stories drawn from the Old Testament” (15). This concern led him to compose the work *Verbondsgeschiedenis* which was translated into English as a four-volume work entitled, *Promise and Deliverance*.²⁹ Although initially targeted at Sunday school teachers, this set of books has made its way to the shelves of many Reformed

pastors who find it a helpful resource in preaching. De Graaf’s goal in *Promise and Deliverance* was to instruct Christian educators how to teach the stories of the Old Testament without falling into the traps of moralism and exemplarism.

The overriding principle of De Graaf’s approach is that the stories of the Old Testament must be interpreted in a Christocentric manner. He stated:

God reveals Himself in His grace only in the Mediator. As a result of the fall, there is no revelation of grace apart from the Mediator. Therefore, your stories should tell about Him, whether you tell the history of the Old Testament or of the New Testament (De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, 18).

While De Graaf contended that the “Old Testament is the book of the Christ to come”, he was not satisfied with a pedantic approach wherein a predictable and simplistic reference to Christ is found in each passage (21). In fact, he clearly despised this approach:

We do the content of the Old Testament an injustice when we repeatedly draw lines from its history to the Christ. We say, for example, that God saved Israel or sent Joseph to Egypt to save His people in order that the Christ might be born of that people. This is certainly a real aspect of revelation. It is a line we must follow because it is suggested by Scripture itself. But it is not enough (21).

De Graaf argued for a serious exegetical approach to preaching Christ from the Old Testament.

De Graaf believed that the teacher could avoid the simplistic approach by understanding the progressive nature of God’s revelation (21). He did not call the teacher to simply retell the entire redemptive story from each passage, but rather recognize what portion of that story is being unfolded in the particular text in question. He considered every story to be about redemption because each story reveals God as “the prime agent” who acts to complete His redemptive plan in history (19). For De Graaf, all of redemptive history flowed from what he called the “mother-promise” of Genesis 3:15 (21). He described the task of the teacher as recognizing that, “... the seed of redemption is present in every story in the Old Testament” and that the teacher’s “job is to use the light of the New Testament to uncover it” (21).

De Graaf also insisted that the main focus of an Old Testament story was not the person in the story, or his or her particular actions, but rather on what God was doing in and through that person to bring about the fulfillment

27. Trimp, 95. Trimp spends a good section of his book describing the use of examples in preaching in general and by Luther and Calvin. See pages 96–114.

28. S.G. De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, vol. 1, trans. H. Evan Runner (St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada: Paideia Press, 1977) 11. This is from the translator’s introduction.

29. De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, 10. De Graaf’s work was actually built upon the work of an earlier scholar J. C. Sikkel (1885–1920).

of His plan. Rather, De Graaf contended that the exegete must take a covenant oriented approach to interpreting the Old Testament which emphasized God as the main character. He believed that this approach renders it impossible to isolate and individualize the people as the main characters of the stories of the Old Testament (23–24). De Graaf considered it a grave error to preach about an individual personality from the Old Testament in a manner that detached that person from the greater covenant context.

In summary, De Graaf's approach stressed that the text of the Old Testament represents the unfolding of a redemptive story in which God is the main character. Therefore, he believed that the primary focus in teaching and preaching from the Old Testament should be God's actions in the lives of the people of the Old Testament, rather than the actions of the people themselves. Furthermore, he was not content with simplistic and superficial references to Christ as a means of teaching of Old Testament stories, but rather he insisted on serious exegesis which seeks to proclaim the promise of God unfolded throughout the Scriptures.

Sidney Greidanus

The final figure to be reviewed from the Dutch development of the redemptive-historical approach is Sidney Greidanus. Greidanus is currently professor emeritus at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids. He has authored several books on preaching including *Sola Scriptura*, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*³⁰ and, his more recent contribution, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*.³¹ He is the most significant living scholar on the topic of redemptive-historical preaching, both with regard to its historical origin and its practical implementation.

While *Sola Scriptura* and *The Modern Preacher and Ancient Text* yield much helpful information regarding his views on the application of the redemptive-historical method to preaching from the Old Testament, I have chosen to limit my review of Greidanus to *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* given that it best represents the maturation of his life-long study and reflection on this topic.

In the preface to his work, Greidanus notes that the impetus for writing the book was the fact that there was a paucity of available books dealing with the topic of preaching Christ from the Old Testament (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, xii). Greidanus was also motivated by the lack of preaching Christ from the Old Testament in the modern church. In addition to these problems, Greidanus notes that where efforts are made to preach Christ from the Old Testament the

results are often less than satisfying. He admits that he is well aware that, "Horror stories abound of preachers twisting an Old Testament text in order to land miraculously at Calvary" (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 2). Greidanus condemns such an approach noting, "subverting the Scripture in order to preach Christ only undermines the authority of the message."³² While Greidanus laments these problems, he recognizes that they flow from the difficult nature of the task (2–3). It was Greidanus' hope that his book might assist in confronting and solving these problems.

Before setting forth his methodology, Greidanus first identifies the factors which contributed to the lack of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. Among these factors Greidanus cites the following: 1) a human-centered focus in preaching; 2) concerns on the part of pastors regarding forced interpretation; and 3) the more general problem of properly understanding the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

By human-centered preaching, Greidanus is referring to a popular approach to the Old Testament which seeks to preach about the human experiences of the Old Testament saints (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*,³⁴). The major culprit here is biographical preaching which, according to Greidanus, always ends with the errors of "generalizing, spiritualizing, and moralizing" (36).

The problem of forced interpretation usually rears its head in the forms of "allegorizing and typologizing" the Old Testament (36). Here Greidanus is referring to the numerous tortured attempts to find Christ in every symbol and action in the Old Testament.

The third error he mentions is that of understanding the relationship between the two Testaments of Scripture. As Greidanus comments, "Simply put, many preachers separate the Old Testament from the New and view the Old Testament as a non-Christian book" (37–38). These three problems, according to Greidanus,

30. Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

31. Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

32. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 2. In a later part of Greidanus book, he also warns against the danger of "Christomonism" which attempts to detach faith in Christ from faith in God. Interestingly, Greidanus, after warning of the particular danger of this in Lutheran circles due to Luther's methodology, goes on to admit that this danger is a greater risk in churches which fail to sing the psalms, "The tendency toward Christomonism is also noticeable in other Christian communities where the Psalms are no longer sung and "gospel songs" as well as sermons focus primarily on Jesus in isolation from God the Father." (see page 178).

have resulted in a general neglect of the art of preaching Christ from the Old Testament.

Greidanus insists that the exegete must get beyond these errors in order to properly preach Christ from the Old Testament. He informs his readers that to preach Christ from the Old Testament is to “proclaim some facet of the person, work, or teaching of Jesus of Nazareth so that people may believe him, trust him, love him, and obey him” (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 8). He provides the following comprehensive definition of preaching Christ from the Old Testament, “. . . we can define ‘preaching Christ’ as preaching sermons which authentically integrate the message of the text with the climax of God’s revelation in the person, work, and/or teaching of Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament” (10).

After surveying an array of historical and modern approaches to preaching Christ from the Old Testament³³, Greidanus offers his own alternative which he refers to as “the redemptive-historical Christocentric method of interpretation.”³⁴ He describes this approach as follows:

It should be clear by now that our concern is not to preach Christ to the exclusion of the ‘whole counsel of God’ but rather to view the whole counsel of God, with all its teachings, laws, prophecies, and visions, in the light of Jesus Christ. At the same time, it should be

33. In this section of Greidanus’ book he provides a useful historical study covering the history of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. In this study, he includes the views of the Apostolic Fathers, the Reformers (primarily Luther and Calvin), Spurgeon, and Wilhelm Vischer. See Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 69–176.

34. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 227. Greidanus considers his position to be “somewhere between Calvin’s theocentric method and Luther’s Christological method. . .”

35. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 229–230. Greidanus is concerned about the modern exegete’s “predilection to slight the God-centered focus” of the Old Testament. He does not want the exegete to jump over the work of God the Father to land on the person and work of Christ. He calls upon the exegete to take a two-step approach.

36. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 231–232. For example, Greidanus notes that biblical themes and biblical laws “develop” in the transition of the Testaments. Another example cited by Greidanus is that of circumcision developing into its equivalent sign, baptism, in the New Testament. These two signs are linked, but they develop along the lines of redemptive history and therefore result in continuity and discontinuity. He calls upon the exegete to be sensitive to these types of developments within the canon.

37. Although most of these categories are self-explanatory, Redemption in Old Testament Times is not self-evident. By this term, Greidanus is specifically referring to God’s redemption of “his people Israel to be a light to the nations.” (see Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 235).

evident that we must not read the incarnate Christ back into the Old Testament text, which would be eisegesis, but that we should look for legitimate ways of preaching Christ from the Old Testament in the context of the New (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 228).

In order to accomplish this goal, Greidanus sets forth two preliminary steps in the exegetical process.

First, he calls upon the exegete to “understand the passage in its own historical context” (228). Greidanus is adamant that the exegete begin with the grammatico-historical method. He believes it is incumbent upon the exegete to find the historical objective meaning of the text by focusing on the literary, historical, and theocentric interpretation of the text.³⁵ Second, he implores the exegete to “understand the message in the contexts of canon and redemptive history” (230). Greidanus insists that the exegete must understand what the passage means in light of the entire scope of the canon. Specifically, he is concerned that the exegete be sensitive to the legitimate discontinuities between the Testaments.³⁶ Greidanus next instructs the exegete to move from these two preliminary steps to the Christocentric interpretation on the Old Testament text. This second phase of Greidanus’ approach includes seven principles which will assist the exegete in properly navigating the treacherous landscape of the discipline of preaching Christ from the Old Testament.

It is important to note that Greidanus’ seven ways of arriving at a Christocentric interpretation are not equally weighted. The first of the seven ways is the funnel through which all the others flow. Therefore, this first way will be dealt with in greater detail and the remaining six will be summarized briefly. The first way is “**The way of redemptive-historical progression.**”

He views the way of redemptive-historical progression as the transcendent hermeneutic which should govern the discipline of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. He refers to redemptive history as “. . . the bedrock which supports all other ways that lead to Christ in the New Testament” (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 234). He also refers to redemptive history as the “meta-narrative” of the Bible (234). Greidanus understands redemptive history as consisting of four pivotal periods: Creation, Redemption in Old Testament Times (Gen. 3–Mal. 4);³⁷ Redemption through Christ (Mat. 1 – Rev. 20) and New Creation (Rev. 21–22). He understands each of these periods as presenting one unified story of redemption wherein God serves as the primary actor (235–236).

Furthermore, Greidanus emphasizes the progressive nature of redemptive history. He states that the entire Old Testament “progresses steadily and reaches its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and ultimately in the new creation” (237). It is within his discussion of the progressive nature of redemptive history that Greidanus reveals his bias towards an eschatological approach to interpretation. He makes this unequivocal by stating, “The whole Old Testament throbs with a strong eschatological beat” (237). This is the essence of the first of seven ways,³⁸ the remaining ways are summarized as follows:

2. **“The Way of Promise-Fulfillment”** – This way advocates preaching from the Old Testament by focusing on the progressive fulfillment of God’s promises throughout redemptive history. These promises, of course, culminate in the person and work of Christ. Greidanus warns against the error of reading the New Testament text back into the Old and instead promotes a methodology which moves from the Old Testament promise to the fulfillment in Christ and then returns to the text of the Old Testament. Greidanus advocates treating the promise in the Old Testament on its own merits and examining how it was fulfilled in the Old Testament prior to its complete fulfillment in the New.³⁹ He notes that the benefit of this method is that “...it enlarges people’s vision to the full scope of kingdom history; in fact, it places the hearers right in the dynamic flow of God’s promises and fulfillments” (248).

3. **“The Way of Typology”** – Greidanus is careful to differentiate this approach from that of allegory. He notes that typology “...is limited to discovering specific analogies along the axis of God’s acts in redemptive history as revealed in Scripture” (249). He also differentiates this method from that of promise-fulfillment by noting that promises “... are usually words spoken, types are historical events, persons, and institutions. Further, whereas promises point forward to future fulfillment, typology generally moves in the opposite direction, from New Testament fulfillment to the past type” (252). In addition, he is careful to set ground rules for using typology including beginning with a “*literary-historical interpretation*,” searching for the type in the “*central message*” of the text, and determining the “*symbolic meaning* of the person, institution, or event in Old Testament times.”⁴⁰

4. **“The Way of Analogy”** – This method of preaching from the Old Testament focuses on analogies between how God dealt with His people in the Old Testament and how He deals with them in the New Testament.

Greidanus provides the simple example of comparing what God did for Israel with what God did for the church; or what God demanded from Israel and what God demands of the church.⁴¹

5. **“The Way of Longitudinal Themes”** – This way focuses on the history of revelation rather than on redemptive history *per se*. It attempts to preach about Biblical themes in Scripture. Greidanus notes that this approach is primarily related to the work of Biblical Theology. He provides the example of preaching from Deuteronomy 26:12–15, which deals with tithing, and instructs the exegete to follow this theme (i.e. giving, tithing) through revelation noting such things as Paul’s command in 2 Corinthians to be generous in giving.⁴²

6. **“The Way of New Testament References”** – This method emphasizes the use of New Testament references of Old Testament passages as the basis of making a link between the Old Testament and Christ. Greidanus cites examples such as the words of Christ on the cross drawn from Psalm 22 or linking Abraham’s offering of Isaac to God’s giving of His only son in John 3:16 (269–271).

7. **“The Way of Contrast”** – This way recognizes the great contrasts which occur between the Testaments and uses them as a method of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. For example the preacher can contrast Jesus’ sacrifice to the insufficient sacrifices of the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament (271–277).

In addition to offering these seven ways, Greidanus also provides a helpful section in his book which he entitled, “Steps from Old Testament Text to Christocentric Sermon” (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the*

38. Greidanus does provide brief examples of the way of redemptive-historical progression operating in the contexts of narrative, psalms and wisdom literature. See Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 237–240.

39. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 240–249. Greidanus gives examples of how to preach in this manner from the prophets, psalms and narratives.

40. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 257. Greidanus notes that the person, institution or event cannot be type unless it had a symbolic meaning in the Old Testament. He relies on Geerhardus Vos for this insight.

41. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 261–266. Again, Greidanus provides examples of how to preach this way from a variety of Biblical genres.

42. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 266–268. The difference between this method and the strict redemptive-historical approach is that the main focus need not be the development of redemptive themes, but rather this approach can focus on other themes which impact the Christian life, like the example used here of giving.

Old Testament, 279-319). This section applies the seven ways noted above by means of helpful examples from actual texts of Scripture.

Clearly, Greidanus provides the most developed methodology regarding preaching Christ from the Old Testament. He is unashamedly Christ-centered in his approach, but he denounces employing a simplistic approach to arrive at a Christ-centered interpretation which sacrifices the dignity and integrity of the Old Testament. He is not simply advocating reading Christ into every passage of the Old Testament, rather Greidanus calls the preacher to treat the Old Testament text on its own merits and than link the text to Christ through one of the seven ways which he has outlined.

Edmund Clowney

Edmund Clowney (1917–2005) was a professor of practical theology, and eventually became president, of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He later also taught occasionally at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. In 1961, Clowney published a book in which he weighed in on the preaching debate. The book was entitled *Preaching and Biblical Theology*.⁴³

The overarching principle of Clowney's approach as expressed in this book is to preach Christ. He wrote, "Most important of all, biblical theology serves to center preaching on its essential message: Jesus Christ" (Clowney, 74). Clowney relied heavily upon the work of Vos to establish and defend his approach to preaching. It is important to note that in his book Clowney does not always employ the terminology "redemptive-historical," but rather often prefers to use the term "biblical-theological."⁴⁴ However, the two terms are basically synonymous in Clowney's thought.

Clowney considered the biblical-theological approach as the means to resolve many of the difficulties which preachers face when attempting to preach Christ from the Old Testament (74). He echoed two classic themes of the redemptive-historical approach, the unity of Scripture and the progressive nature of revelation:

The unifying structure of Scripture is the structure of redemptive history. The Bible does not have the form of a textbook, and the witness to Christ unfolds with

the progressive epochs of revelation which in turn are grounded in the successive periods of redemption. Biblical theology recognizes both the unity and the epochal structure of redemptive history (Clowney, 74–75).

He believed that this redemptive-historical perspective, which he labeled as the "theological horizon," is essential to Christ-centered preaching (75).

Clowney believed that a neglect of the theological horizon inevitably leads to a series of errors in preaching. First, Clowney argued that a rejection of the theological horizon results in a type of preaching that is simply "moralizing" and "misses the progress of redemptive history and fails to see Christ in the midst" (75). As an example of this danger, Clowney cited the example of preaching about Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac as simply a test of Abraham's faith. (75). Second, Clowney contended that a rejection of the theological horizon may also result in allegorism and he cited the example of allegorizing the red cord of Rahab as a type of the blood of Christ (75). A third error cited by Clowney is taking a static, isolated and atomistic view of the Old Testament. He described this as follows:

If, on the other hand, we develop the most thorough knowledge of the period without relating its conceptions to the whole structure of redemptive history, we may risk the mistake of the history of religions school, failing to recognize, in the organic development of the whole, the hand of God in redemption and his voice in revelation (Clowney, 75).

According to Clowney, the exegete can avoid these errors by always keeping the theological horizon before him when preaching from the Old Testament.

In addition to recognizing the importance of the theological horizon, Clowney also insisted that preaching from the Old Testament must be Christocentric and connected to New Testament realities, "The Christian proclamation of an Old Testament text is not the preaching of an Old Testament sermon" (75). Clowney advocated the use of the promise-fulfillment approach to preach Christ from the Old Testament noting that, "Since it is the Son of God who fulfills these promises, the redemptive epiphanies of God are particular revelations of Christ" (77).

Up to this point, Clowney's approach adds little new material to the redemptive-historical approach. However, Clowney's discussion of preaching becomes more intriguing when he deals with the tension between the redemptive-historical approach and the exemplary

43. Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961).

44. These two terms are often used interchangeably and Clowney's definition of biblical theology is nearly identical to the redemptive-historical hermeneutic. Clowney may favor biblical theology as a term because of his respect for Geerhardus Vos.

approach. The interesting twist in Clowney's thought is his attempt to downplay this tension, even to the point of denying its existence.⁴⁵ For example, he states, "It has been assumed by some that a choice must be made between ethical preaching and that which is redemptive-historical. The New Testament, however, not only sanctions both but does not set them in opposition" (78). As evidence for his position Clowney cites the use of Job and Elijah as examples in the Epistle of James and 1 Corinthians 10:11 which make a general statement regarding the role of Old Testament examples (Clowney, 78).

In Clowney's view the two approaches, redemptive-historical and ethical (or exemplary), must be utilized together because the "redemptive-historical approach necessarily yields ethical application, which is an essential part of preaching the Word" (80). He recognized that obtaining the proper balance and relationship between these two approaches is difficult and that exegetes often overemphasize one to the neglect of the other. However, he considered his biblical-theological approach, emphasizing the unfolding of the covenant of grace in redemptive history, as the means by which to resolve this dilemma (Clowney, 81–82).

Clowney provided several examples of striking a proper balance between redemptive-historical and exemplary preaching included among these is the conflict between David and Goliath (82–86). He saw the redemptive-historical significance of this particular conflict in its demonstration of the theocratic king's utter devotion to see the name of God exalted. According to Clowney, David's devotion in this conflict points us to Christ, the great son of David, who as King exalts His Father who sent Him to perform the work of redemption. The preacher must seize upon this to preach Christ from this Old Testament account, but Clowney did not stop with this insight. He demanded that the exegete proceed to develop the ethical component by connecting all believers to David through emphasis on their role as a kingdom of priests who have the duty, like David, to exalt the name of God in this world (Clowney, 82–84). Clearly, Clowney's defense of ethical application is a far cry from the moralizing extremes of the exemplary approach. For instance, according to the extremes of the exemplary approach, the message would be reduced to something like "be like David and slay the giants of sin in your own life."

Clowney, like other advocates the redemptive-historical approach, emphasized the unity of Scripture, the unfolding nature of the redemptive plan and the centrality of preaching Christ. However, he also argued that

ethical application may be made without eviscerating the redemptive-historical message of the text.

Graeme Goldsworthy

The final advocate of the redemptive-historical approach that we will examine is Graeme Goldsworthy who is a lecturer in Old Testament, biblical theology and hermeneutics at Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia. He recently authored a book related to this inquiry entitled, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*.⁴⁶ In the preface to his work, Goldsworthy reveals his purpose, "The aim of this book is to provide a handbook for preachers that will help them apply a consistently Christ-centered approach to their sermons" (Goldsworthy, IX).

Goldsworthy, like the other scholars reviewed in this article, recognizes the difficulty inherent in preaching Christ from the Old Testament. He states, "It is plainly easier as a Christian to preach from the New Testament than from the Old" (Goldsworthy, XII). Goldsworthy laments the fact that the difficulty inherent in preaching Christ from the Old Testament leads many to use simplistic and predictable ways of attaching a Christocentric meaning to the text. To support this claim he cites anecdotal evidence from his teaching experience noting that students often recount to him how they often say to themselves in the middle of an Old Testament sermon, "Ho hum! now here comes the Jesus bit" (Goldsworthy, XI). Goldsworthy places the blame for these problems on the academy. In his view, the theological academy aggravated the problem of preaching Christ from the Old Testament because the theological institutions in which they operate have strictly separated the departments which deal with the two Testaments (Goldsworthy, XIII). He believes that this division leads students to study the Old Testament in "total isolation" from the New Testament and, therefore, provides them with little help on "how this significant body of literature should function as Christian Scripture" (XIII). In the remainder of his book, Goldsworthy endeavors to remedy this problem.

Goldsworthy begins by laying a foundation of what he considers to be the most important principles in preaching. These include understanding the unity and selectivity of redemptive history, the progressive nature

45. It is in this section of his work that Clowney begins to use the term redemptive-historical and demonstrates his awareness of the debate which arose in the Netherlands.

46. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

of divine revelation, the tension between the Testaments, and the role of epochs in revelation. Each of these principles warrants further explanation.

First, Goldsworthy argues that the Bible is unified and this unity rests in the fact that the Bible reveals the unfolding saving work of Jesus Christ (Goldsworthy, 60). However, Goldsworthy admits that “The matter of the nature of the unity of the Bible is quite a complex one” (67). It is complex because while the Bible is unified, it is also selective. Goldsworthy considers biblical theology as the tool to properly understand the relationship between the unity and selectivity of Scripture. According to Goldsworthy, biblical theology directs the interpreter of the Old Testament through the selectivity of biblical history by connecting the selectivity directly to the revelation of the redemptive plan. He explains, “Thus we follow Seth, not Cain; Shem, not Ham; Abraham, not Lot; Israel, not Edom; David, not Saul; Judah, not Samaria; Jerusalem, not Babylon” (69). Goldsworthy is noting the fact that the Bible is concerned especially with redemptive history and the preacher must be attuned to this selectivity to preach the Old Testament accurately.

Second, Goldsworthy insists that the history of the Bible must be understood progressively. According to Goldsworthy, the exegete must keep in mind that the history of the Bible is moving forward to the consummation, “From one point of view the revelation is not complete until the great consummation, the final stage when the people of God see God face to face and are revealed with Christ in glory” (73). He demands that preaching from the Old Testament reflect the progressive nature of revelation, particularly its culmination in the New Testament in the work of Christ. He states, “Preaching from the Old Testament demands of us some appreciation of how the text relates to Christian existence” and further that “The bottom line in all this is that all texts somehow testify to Jesus” (Goldsworthy, 73, 76).

Third, while Goldsworthy espouses the unity of Scripture he also contends that Scripture is not uniform. Goldsworthy locates this lack of uniformity primarily

in the tension between the Testaments which he expresses by citing a number of “polarities” between the Testaments (73). Goldsworthy articulates the following polarities: “salvation history and eschatological consummation, type and anti-type, promise and fulfillment, law and gospel, and Israel and the church” (73). It is crucial to recognize that Goldsworthy’s goal is not to create a dichotomy between the Testaments, but rather his intent is to make the exegete sensitive to the presence of these polarities so that he may use them as a means of understanding the complexity of the unity of the Bible. He summarizes his thoughts on this topic by noting that revelation has “essential unity” with “underlying... diversity” (74).

Finally, Goldsworthy cautions against viewing revelation as unfolding in a consistent, gradual and predictable manner. He contends that progressive revelation unfolds through “discernible stages or epochs”, but he argues that this progression is not gradual and even, but rather abrupt and uneven (74). He argues that the preacher must comprehend these epochs and the transitions between them. He further contends that the preacher must treat these epochs seriously and he suggests that the preacher must examine the “historical details, the characters, or the institutions that figure in the text...in the epoch to which they belong” (Goldsworthy, 114). Accordingly, Goldsworthy advocates taking the Old Testament seriously by means of a grammatico-historical approach focused on the original context.⁴⁷

After explaining these basic principles, Goldsworthy moves to the next step by presenting three major methods of preaching Christ from the Old Testament including: Promise-Fulfillment, Type-Antitype (typology) and Salvation History-Eschatological Goal (76–80). The first two methods are very similar to Greidanus’ methods (“ways” no. 2 and no. 3 respectively) and do not warrant further comment, but the third approach, although present in the thought of Greidanus and others, is more deeply developed by Goldsworthy, and therefore, is worth examining in more detail.

Goldsworthy’s method of Salvation History-Eschatological Goal, is his effort to convince the exegete that preaching from the Old Testament must begin with eschatology rather than ending with it.⁴⁸ He considers it essential to understand that salvation history flows out of eschatology, as he puts it, “Salvation history is the process of eschatology being worked out in the history of our world” (Goldsworthy, 79). Goldsworthy maintains that the Gospel is central to the fulfillment of biblical eschatology and therefore it is present in the

47. Goldsworthy advocates understanding an Old Testament passage first in light of how it would have been understood by the original audience. However, he adamantly commands that our preaching cannot remain there. He states, “I maintain that no Christian preacher ever lets the Old Testament speak purely in and of itself.” He demands that we proceed to a Christian interpretation, but simply does not want us to do so in a careless manner. See Goldsworthy, 125–127, under the title, “Letting the Old Testament Speak.”

48. Goldsworthy, 79. Geerhardus Vos is credited with recognizing the priority of eschatology in revelation.

entire unfolding of salvation history. He refers to the Gospel as the “hermeneutical key” to all of Scripture (81–96). This eschatological perspective, with its Gospel focus, inevitably drives the exegete toward Christ-centered preaching.

For Goldsworthy, Christ is the central message of the Old and New Testaments. As evidence of this, he poses the following question to his readers, “Can I preach a Christian sermon without mentioning Jesus?” and he answers it as follows, “Why would you even want to try to preach a Christian sermon without mentioning Jesus? Is there anywhere else we can look in order to see God? To see true humanity? To see the meaning of anything in creation?” (115). He makes this even more emphatic by stating, “The key question of interpretation is, ‘How does this text testify to Christ?’” (Goldsworthy, 122). Goldsworthy demands that preaching from the Old Testament must be the proclamation of Christ and His Gospel.

SUMMARY AND RECAPITULATION

Having reviewed the writings of several prominent advocates of the redemptive-historical approach, a synthesis of their contributions may now be articulated. While all of the advocates share similar core themes, they each also make idiosyncratic contributions which make the whole of their combined work more valuable than each individual component part. The following is a brief summary of the main principles gleaned from these various sources:

1. **All of Scripture is Christ-Centered:** Christ, and His work, is the story of revelation and the preacher must orient himself by the person and work of Christ.
2. **God is the primary actor in the Bible:** Preaching must be focused on God and His actions toward His people and not on the actions of the people themselves.
3. **Redemptive history is progressive:** The history of the Bible is not static, but rather progresses toward the fulfillment of God’s plan.
4. **Redemptive history is unified:** The Bible represents one story of salvation.
5. **Redemptive history is selective:** The Bible focuses in on the redemptive story leading to the work of Christ. It deals with the fulfillment of God’s promises through the lives of God’s people. The Bible is concerned primarily with covenant history.
6. **Redemptive history is revealed through various epochs:** The progressive unfolding of God’s plan in the Scriptures occurs through epochs (Creation, Fall, Patriarchs, Israel as Nation, Israel as Kingdom,

Captivity, Restoration, New Covenant, Consummation, etc.) which, while related and unified, also represent important shifts in God’s relationship with His people. The most drastic shift that occurred in redemptive history is the transition to the New Covenant.

7. **Redemptive history is eschatological:** Redemptive history represents the fulfillment of God’s plan and thus is directed by eschatology. The preacher must understand that eschatology precedes redemption because it was present as a goal set before Adam in the covenant of works.

ASSESSMENT OF THE REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL APPROACH

It is the author’s opinion that the redemptive-historical approach to preaching from the Old Testament is the best approach available. It alone adequately addresses the challenge of preaching from the Old Testament. It is built upon the foundation of the grammatico-historical method and demands a serious treatment of the Old Testament text. It also inexorably forces the exegete to preach Christ and the realities of redemption.

This doesn’t mean, however, that the approach is without its flaws, particularly as it is often applied in the modern pulpit. Unfortunately, many of the benefits of the redemptive-historical approach have been obscured by the behavior of some of its more recent and ardent defenders who have morphed the approach into a theological movement. Once the approach became a movement it attracted hardcore followers, particularly among the ranks of young seminarians, who have gravitated to extremes and often done a disservice to the approach.

The manifestation of this movement dynamic among some advocates of the redemptive-historical approach has led Reformed theologians like John Carrick, John Frame and Jay Adams to criticize the movement even though they value aspects of the method. For example, John Carrick, in his book, *The Imperative of Preaching*, launched numerous salvos at the redemptive-historical approach, mostly aimed at the extremes of those enamored with it as a movement. In his book, Carrick contends that the redemptive-historical approach, as applied by many of its modern advocates, often fails to be faithful to the Reformed tradition of *explicatio et applicatio verbi Dei*, inappropriately promotes an effective hermeneutical tool to the governing force of the entire homiletical process, leads to an obsession with particular terms, results in an unhealthy level of homage for Geerhardus Vos (Carrick uses the term “hyper-Vosian”), underemphasizes the *ordo salutis* and unfairly ignores

numerous biblical texts which support an exemplary use of the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Corinthians 10:6, James 5:10–11, 17, Luke 17:32 and Hebrews 11).⁴⁹

John Frame shares many of Carrick's concerns and expresses them in his article entitled, "Ethics, Preaching and Biblical Theology."⁵⁰ Like Carrick, Frame sees great benefit in the contributions of biblical theology and the redemptive-historical approach, but, also like Carrick, he believes that some have taken the approach to an unhelpful extreme. Frame lists eight points of concern in his article regarding the redemptive-historical approach many of which focus on young seminarians and pastors becoming enamored with a method which ultimately, in Frame's view, leads them into "jargon-laden" and poorly constructed sermons.

Finally, Jay Adams also joined his voice to the chorus of those raising concerns about the redemptive-historical approach to preaching. Adams has written prolifically on the topic of preaching and is adamant about the necessity of application in preaching, something he finds wanting in many practitioners of the redemptive-historical approach. Adams has even criticized the published sermons of Geerhardus Vos for their lack of application,

49. John Carrick, *The Imperative of Preaching: A Theology of Sacred Rhetoric* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 2002). I find John Carrick's critique of redemptive-historical preaching to be the most helpful. I also benefited greatly from his book on preaching and highly recommend it.

50. John M. Frame, "Ethics, Preaching and Biblical Theology" available at www.thirdmill.org and www.frame-poythress.org.

51. Jay Adams, *Truth Applied* (London: Wakeman Trust, 1990) 20. John Carrick has made similar remarks regarding the preaching of Vos, criticizing it for its perceived overemphasis on the indicative mood (see John Carrick, "Redemptive-Historical Preaching: An Assessment." *Katekomen: A Publication of Greenville Presbyterian Seminary* vol. 13, no. 1, Summer 2001, 11–12).

52. Jay Adams, "The Proper Use of Biblical Theology in Preaching," *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, vol. 9, no. 1, 47. Adams likens redemptive-historical preaching to a "one-week tour of Europe" where "very little time can be spent at any one location."

53. See Adams, *Truth Applied*, 20 and Adams, "The Proper Use of Biblical Theology in Preaching," 47–49. Adams particularly refers to a link between redemptive-historical preaching and the theology of Karl Barth.

54. I'm most persuaded by some of the careful criticisms of Carrick. I find Frame and Adams' critiques to be more like "straw man" arguments. It is very easy to attack the extreme examples, excesses and the sermons of seminarians!

55. For instance, Mark Boda employs the term "redemptive-ethical" as a complementary concept to "redemptive-historical" in his book on King David. See Mark Boda, *After God's Own Heart: The Gospel According to David* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2007), 4. Boda's book on David is part of P & R Publishing's *The Gospel According to the Old Testament* series which represents an effort to champion a redemptive-historical approach to lives of Old Testament saints.

"Although these sermons are beautifully written and full of instructive matter, there is no application in them."⁵¹ Adams also criticizes redemptive-historical preaching because, in his opinion, it too often sounds more like a lecture than a sermon and because it overemphasizes the "forest" of the full scope of redemption while giving only a cursory treatment to the actual "trees" of a particular text.⁵² Adams even goes so far as to suggest that there is a link between redemptive-historical preaching and neo-orthodoxy.⁵³

While I ultimately embrace the redemptive-historical approach to preaching *all* of Scripture, I must admit that I find merit in some of the criticisms of Carrick, Frame and Adams.⁵⁴ I've personally witnessed the inappropriate use of the redemptive-historical approach and I confess that some of my early preaching was illustrative of such criticisms. In addition, my study of historical theology makes me mindful of the fact that when such matters become the subject of movements there is risk for unnecessary distraction, division and debate in the church. Finally, I must also admit that I sometimes wrestle with whether the original opponents of the redemptive-historical approach in the Netherlands had some wisdom when they suggested an exemplary-redemptive-historical synthesis. I recently came across the term "redemptive-ethical" which was employed by an author as a complement to the term "redemptive-historical."⁵⁵ This term seems helpful to me as a means of acknowledging that the indicatives of God's mighty acts in redemptive history consistently lead to concrete ethical imperatives in our lives. I think advocates of the redemptive-historical approach would be well served by greater exploration of the proper role of imperatives and ethics in redemptive history.

In conclusion, while I readily acknowledge the merit of some of the criticisms of the redemptive-historical approach, I remain steadfast in my conviction that the redemptive-historical approach, when it is properly understood and applied, liberates the preacher from the bondage of both moralism and allegoricalism. Even more significantly, the redemptive-historical approach allows the people of God to see Jesus from a portion of Scripture that they are inclined to misunderstand, dismiss as irrelevant, or neglect entirely. By means of the redemptive-historical approach the pilgrims in the pew experience the joy of traveling the Emmaus road and having their hearts burn with the glories of Christ as he is revealed to them from the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms. ■