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Sidney Greidanus

***Preaching Christ from the Old Testament:  
A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method.***

*Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.*

Africa, while flourishing when it comes to skilled rhetoricians, is sadly lacking in competent preachers. Yes, there is a difference between good speakers and good preachers. During a years worth of African chapel and worship services, I have heard only a handful of sermons from the Old Testament. In those few sermons, only one mentioned the name of Christ. Africa is certainly not alone in this inadequacy. Many preachers tend to preach sermons that call their congregation to lead better lives. It seems that far too many of these great orators equate ethical instruction with preaching. In fact, most "preachers" are not preaching at all—at least not according to the Bible's definition.

Sidney Greidanus is the homiletics professor at Calvin Theological Seminary and has published many books. His most well known text is *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* and it was selected as the journal *Preaching's* 1990 Book of the Year. Greidanus spent five months in South Africa doing research for this book as well as much time in Europe and North America. In so doing he has blessed the church with a new challenge to preachers. He calls them to preach Christ every time they take the pulpit. Why only one topic every week? Because it is the one topic of which every passage in the Bible points. Greidanus' book, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* combines homiletics and hermeneutics. While every seminary in the world teaches the art and science of preaching and interpreting, it seems that the preachers in the church have trouble connecting the two when it comes to the pulpit.

Greidanus is helpful in many ways, but his two most significant impacts are in his ability to inspire preachers to truly preach and the skilled organization of his more than worthy content. As an example of this first great benefit, he discourages what he calls "pairing," that is, preaching an OT text and a NT text together. (43) He is certainly right in suggesting that this causes problems. Foremost among the difficulties is that we are forced to read the OT text through only one (possibly ill-chosen) NT text. Rather, throughout the book, he encourages the preacher to preach the OT texts in their context (exegesis) and interpret them by using the more recent revelation of the *entire* NT (hermeneutics).

Greidanus redemptive-historical interpretation may not be unique, but the organization makes this book unparalleled and therefore immensely valuable. In fact, you can limit yourself to reading only the titles and subtitles within each chapter and still walk away with a new desire and ability to preach Christ from the OT. The book has 8 chapters, but they can easily be categorized into four even sections of 2 chapters each. He begins his first section by establishing the need for Christocentric preaching from the OT (chapters 1-2) and I am sure that he will convince even the most adamant doubter of this need. His next section is a concise history of preaching Christ from the apostolic fathers to the modern day (chapters 3-4). It surveys many of the key players in hermeneutics and certainly most of the key moves. When I say that it is concise, I do not mean to imply that it is short or inadequate—in fact, it is over 100 pages and is one of the finest summaries I have seen. The most helpful part of the book shows his biblical-theological “method” for finding Christ (chapters 5-6). He suggests 6 (or 7 in chapter 6) methods for finding Christ: Redemptive-historical progression, promise-fulfillment, typology, analogy, longitudinal themes, New Testament references, and contrast. It is in these sections that he deals with the most controversial issues and I was immensely glad that he did not skirt these questions. For instance he has much to say regarding the difference between typology and allegory. He discusses the difference between theocentric and Christocentric reading. He even wrestles with “Big picture” questions like whether the OT is a sub-Christian text or not. His final section is the practical section of the book (chapters 7-8). Here he includes ten steps for preparing a sermon and follows this up with five extended examples from the Old Testament. While the organization was the most appealing thing to me, I must also mention its extreme readability. A first year college student could easily navigate this book and gain much from it.

His historical redemptive method was pedagogically very helpful for me, but there were some things that I did have to question. Most of my questions were minor. For instance he discusses the way (or method) of NT references in order to find Christ, but I felt this seemed to fit more in a basic exegesis textbook than it did in a hermeneutics book. To argue that we should cross-reference into the NT seemed a bit elementary considering the great insights of the book. To be fair, he does say this is more for confirmation reasons than anything else (269).

While I always found his main points to be quite helpful, I often found his examples not as well suited to his main point. Granted this was because of minor theological differences between us. For example, his understanding of imprecations as opposed to NT teaching (272) is quite controversial. Considering the host of curses found in the NT, I found his use of this example quite unconvincing. However, I was pleased to see that he did give a nod to the alternative view (275)

which I have argued for in some depth in a recent article. So, provided you understand his theological stance, the example does what he intended—it illustrates a distinction between the Old and New Testament. At another time, he suggests a contrast between God’s command to annihilate certain Canaanites as part of the ban and Christ’s commands in the NT. However, it is not that we are to refrain from Holy War today, but that our war is different. While he uses this as an example to preach by way of contrast, I tend to move in a more thematic direction.

Another hesitation with the way of contrast is one I share with many of his examples. I often felt that his examples were too limited. The pericope he chose often ended before the main point of the text. For instance, in preaching from Ecclesiastes he focused on the meaninglessness of everything in 12:8 and contrasted this with Christ’s defeating death in I Corinthians 15 (276). He did not mention the contrast that comes just a few verses later within the context of Ecclesiastes. It seems that preaching the first half of Ecclesiastes 12 with a quick jump to the NT contrast is unwarranted and even exegetically lacking. He emphasizes progressive revelation but neglects the larger immediate context. Of course, I recognize the limitations of the medium and that examples are for illustrative purposes only. I am sure if Greidanus was preaching this text, he would tie in the many positive statements found in Ecclesiastes with his Christo-centric conclusions.

His sections on typology were extremely helpful; although, I thought his many qualifications for using typology took away from his later ability to use this in almost any circumstance. If we allow for typological interpretations by way of the anointed offices of prophet, priest or king (258-259), we are practically unlimited in our connections. For instance, any time someone prays in the OT, we have a prophetic role being enacted and this ties us directly to our great prophet. Any time a sacrifice or a battle takes place we see the roles of priests and kings and can therefore make the connection to our great priest and king. Even when these things are done wrongly, we can simply point to the better Anointed One who will not fail like those in the Old Testament. While Greidanus may not want to refer to these negative examples as types of Christ (260), they still point to Christ as the one who will fulfill these offices perfectly. Maybe he would feel more comfortable placing these situations into the way of contrast, but they are typological contrasts nonetheless.

The above hesitations are undoubtedly minor and my final one may prove to be so as well. As already hinted at, there seemed to be some exegetical/hermeneutical confusion throughout the book. While I agree that the NT is not a textbook on biblical hermeneutics (189), I question Greidanus’ attachment to “rules” of hermeneutics. If different generations of Christians practiced different “rules” of

interpretation, why are we so convinced that the historico-grammatical method is supreme? I found Greidanus far too dependant on Longenecker's view of only using that Apostles methods when they follow historico-grammatical exegesis (190-191). While Longenecker has greatly enhanced my own understanding on this issue, I continue to wonder why we are discouraged from using the apostle's "methods." We often laugh at the allegorical interpretations of Origen and the Alexandrian school. Greidanus buttresses this feeling saying that to use allegorical interpretation on historical narrative is to "make a genre mistake and to read alien ideas into the text"(88) and he later says quite plainly, "allegorical interpretation...is to be rejected" (236). If Paul was correct that Sarah and Hagar are covenants and that Hagar does stand for Mt. Sinai and that her heirs are slaves, who are we to say that this is inappropriate? Did the apostles have an endowed privilege to treat the OT unfairly? Is it possible that we can indeed do what the apostles did? May it be the case that the goal of the NT apostles was sufficient and method is simply not as important as we think it is? Greidanus' subtitle "A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method" does stress the current state of hermeneutics but what I question is whether our current state is the correct one. Even Greidanus suggests a typological method and most will agree that this is not grammatico-historical in approach. I have not for a moment considered throwing out the grammatico-historical method and I would dismiss any scholar who suggested such a thing. Still, I think that Greidanus, along with most modern Evangelicals, simply gives it too much preeminence.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the few trivial cautions, I am very excited about this book and wish that I could have had the privilege of introducing it to African scholars five years ago when it was published. Both its subject matter and its heuristic organization make it a must read for seminary and Bible college students as well as for those who are already veteran pastors. While I have seldom read a book that did not prompt theological question and controversy, I hope that my few minor interrogations here will not dissuade one from reading this book. I can truthfully say that I have seldom read a book in which I find so little to disagree with. The author is a great theologian and I recommend this work unreservedly. It is time for the African pastor to commit along with the apostle Paul to preaching Christ and Him crucified.

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<sup>1</sup> For a helpful discussion on this see Dan G. McCartney's "The New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic* (ed. Harvie Conn; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), p. 101-116.