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# CHRIST-CENTRED INTERPRETATION ONLY? MORAL INSTRUCTION FROM SCRIPTURE'S SELF- INTERPRETATION AS CAVEAT AND GUIDE

JASON HOOD

A number of leading evangelical scholars and pastors employ and propagate a Christ-centred or gospel-centred approach to interpreting the Bible.<sup>1</sup> This essay describes this influential method for interpretation and encourages its use, but also provides a caveat in light of Scripture's self-interpretation. The consistent use of Scripture for moral instruction may be seen in the use of the OT in the NT and in Scripture's own purpose statements, which must guide contemporary interpreters in building an interpretative method. Moral instruction is an overlooked and sometimes denigrated component of biblical interpretation by those engaged in the otherwise healthy drive to interpret Christ in all the Scriptures.

## A CHRIST-CENTRED SCHOOL OF INTERPRETATION

The roots of Christocentric interpretation derive chiefly from the Protestant Reformation and evangelical pietism, although some neo-orthodoxy and other 20<sup>th</sup> century theological currents share these interests in some respects. The first part of this essay is a review of more recent influential scholars and pastors, since their voices are shaping contemporary interpretation. The observations in this review are selective, designed to provide a workable overview of the Christocentric method and to focus attention on aspects of the method to be addressed in the third section.

### *Timothy Keller and Edmund Clowney*

Perhaps the best-known proponent of Christocentric preaching is New York Times best-selling author Timothy J. Keller, a pastor of an influential church in New York City and former professor of preaching at Westminster Theological Seminary. Keller relies heavily on the concept of 'sanctification by gospel', a dictum inherited from Martin Luther.<sup>2</sup> All

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'Christ-centred' and Christocentric will be employed interchangeably in the present essay, as they are more widely used than the moniker 'Gospel-centred'; several of those practitioners cited below use these terms more or less interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> See similarly the citation of Luther and the use of gospel as motivation in R. S. Clark, 'Letter and the Spirit: Law and Gospel in Reformed Preaching', in

sins are a function of failing to believe the gospel; therefore, gospel, not moral instruction, should receive the focus of Christian sermons. He is concerned to motivate audiences to the obedience required by Scripture not with law, fear and guilt, but with a better grasp of the substitutionary nature of the gospel. Along with others named below Keller warns against doctrinal preaching that pitches the riches of theology at a high academic level and misses the heart and the life of congregants, and moralistic preaching that targets wills but not the heart.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary interpreters have much to learn from Keller's method. He is arguably the most influential of those pastors and scholars addressed here despite the fact that he has not published on this issue, apart from influential church planting materials and unpublished lectures. Keller sees himself in large part as utilizing and popularizing the method he received from his predecessor at Westminster, Edmund Clowney. The two men co-taught a Doctor of Ministry course, 'Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World', now popular as a free download available via the iTunesU platform.<sup>4</sup> A number of Clowney's works remain in print and continue to exert influence.<sup>5</sup>

### *Bryan Chapell*

Also notable for his influence in contemporary practical theology is Bryan Chapell, president of Covenant Seminary and author of *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*.<sup>6</sup> This text is one of the most successful books on preaching ever written, going through seven printings in its first six years. *Christ-Centered Preaching* receiving the award for 'Book of the Year' by *Preaching* magazine and the Religious Speech Communication Association; a second edition appeared in 2005.<sup>7</sup> In the interest of centring interpretation and proclamation on Christ and

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*Justification, Covenant and Pastoral Ministry*, ed. R. S. Clark (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2006), p. 332.

<sup>3</sup> Keller helpfully notes that moralism can be found on the right and on the left of the theological and ecclesiological spectrum.

<sup>4</sup> Available at <http://itunes.rts.edu/>

<sup>5</sup> 'Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures', in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. S. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), p. 163–91; *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988); *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003). The latter book and the audio from Reformed Theological Seminary contain, among other gems, sage advice on possible mistakes made in preaching Christ.

<sup>6</sup> Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.

redemption, Chapell criticizes sermons whose main messages constitute anything other than sinners' need for redemption in the work of Christ. Therefore, "'be good" messages', "'be disciplined" messages' and "'be like" messages' alike are off-limits.<sup>8</sup> We are warned: 'A message that merely advocates morality and compassion remains sub-Christian *even if the preacher can prove that the Bible demands such behaviors.*' 'Moral maxims and advocacy of ethical conduct fall short of the requirements of biblical preaching.'<sup>9</sup>

### *Michael Scott Horton and R. Scott Clark*

Michael Horton also contributes to this debate. As a cultural critic and apologist, Horton is concerned with the way in which the church is consumed by the culture. He and Scott Clark enjoin preachers to commit to preaching the Law-Gospel divide which is "found throughout Scripture" and in church history.<sup>10</sup> Specific differences in content notwithstanding, in practice the interpretive emphases in these authors is not substantially different from the Christ-centered focus of evangelical expositors.

### *Sidney Greidanus*

Homiletics scholar Sidney Greidanus explored interpretive method in an extensive study of a major debate over the content of preaching in the Dutch Reformed Church in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>11</sup> More recently Greidanus builds on this work in articulating and defending the practice of Christ-centred preaching.<sup>12</sup> Although writing as an evangelical Greidanus also cites recent interpreters outside evangelicalism. Forerunners from the middle of the twentieth century include Donald Gowan, Ernest

<sup>8</sup> Chapell, p. 281–4. See also 267–8 for preaching requirements that render the book of James and much of Jesus' own preaching sub-Christian.

<sup>9</sup> Chapell, p. 268 [274 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.]; emphasis in first sentence added.

<sup>10</sup> M. S. Horton, 'What Are We Looking for in the Bible?' *Modern Reformation* 5.3 (1996), pp. 4–8. R. Scott Clark critiques modern sermons as failing to engage law-gospel in favour of focus on humans and 'one's self'. See his, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), p. 73. Compare Clark, 'What the Bible is All About', *Modern Reformation* 16.2 (2007), pp. 20–4; 'Letter and Spirit'; and D. E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ From all the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> S. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge, 1970).

<sup>12</sup> Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), and most recently *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

Best and Karl Barth, all cited as purveyors of an explicitly Christocentric (as opposed to theocentric or anthropocentric) approach to preaching and interpretation.<sup>13</sup> Among others on whom Greidanus relies Leander Keck challenges the notion that the historical-cultural gap between Scripture and contemporary audiences should be bridged by means of moralizing, 'drawing moral inferences, usually things to do or become'.<sup>14</sup> William Willimon states that such moralizing is 'perhaps the most frequent modern interpretive pitfall', into which interpreters stumble as a result of their desire to 'be relevant'.<sup>15</sup>

Greidanus denigrates 'biographical preaching, character preaching and the use of human "examples" for imitation'.<sup>16</sup> 'Imitating Bible characters, though popular and superficially easy, is a dead-end road for true biblical preaching.'<sup>17</sup> He again cites theological heavyweights from across the theological spectrum, including Martin Noth: 'A legitimate "re-presentation" cannot use the individual human figures of biblical history as its subjects, either as ethical "models", which in fact they never are, or as exemplary "heroes of faith" since in the biblical narratives they are never so presented.' Characters must not, Noth and Greidanus contend, 'be imitated'.<sup>18</sup> John Goldingay is similarly cited: 'To concentrate on the human deed' as opposed to the divine act, which more often than not works *despite* human effort not through it, 'is often to miss the point of it. Indeed, it is not merely to misuse it: it is to bring a message that is its opposite.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 117. For Barth, see especially *Homiletics* and *Church Dogmatics* 1.2.

<sup>14</sup> L. Keck, *The Bible and the Pulpit: the Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p. 101; cited by Greidanus, *Modern Preacher and Ancient Text*, p. 163.

<sup>15</sup> W. Willimon, *Preaching and Leading in Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 71; cited by Greidanus, *Modern Preacher and Ancient Text*, p. 164. See also pp. 178–9 in the latter text.

<sup>16</sup> Greidanus, *Modern Preacher*, pp. 117, 163.

<sup>17</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher*, pp. 161–3. He references his *Sola Scriptura* 56–120.

<sup>18</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher*, p. 163, citing M. Noth, "'Re-presentation" of the OT in Proclamation', in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. C. Westermann (Richmond: John Knox, 1962), p. 86.

<sup>19</sup> J. Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 39.

*Graham Goldsworthy*

Goldsworthy's context is that of a biblical scholar working against the resistance to Christian interpretation in the guild. One of his most helpful observations is that, for the purpose of Christian interpretation, the context of a passage is not just the biblical book in which the passage is located or the paragraphs surrounding it, but the whole of Scripture. As a result whenever a passage is interpreted 'in context', Christ becomes an integral (in his view, a central) component of the passages meaning. He cites multiple texts undergirding a Christocentric approach including 2 Timothy 3:15-17: 'Paul here expresses the important hermeneutical principle that the OT instructs us for salvation, but only in relation to Jesus Christ. The function of the gospel as the means of interpreting aright the OT is inescapable unless we believe that there is something other than salvation involved as the main subject of God's word to us.'<sup>20</sup> Along with other observations in this review the use of this passage by Goldsworthy and others will be revisited below.

*Conclusion: A Christ-centred school of interpretation*

Notwithstanding differences in emphasis, theology and practice in these writers they share enough of a common focus that one can speak of a 'Christ-centred' or 'Gospel-centred' school of interpretation in hermeneutics and preaching. In particular this school's tenants derive from Reformed scholars and preachers going back to Spurgeon and beyond. The impact of Christocentric interpretation is felt among evangelical biblical scholars, theologians, homileticians and laypersons, although it should be noted that Christocentric trends are also present in mainline Protestant thought, as Greidanus shows.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 84-5.

<sup>21</sup> The label also percolates in Roman Catholic thought, although the content of 'Christocentric' here departs from evangelical and mainline Protestantism, oriented more toward the Mass and the imitation of Jesus. Pope John Paul II debates those desiring to move away from Christocentric models to anthropocentric catechetical material in 'What is a Christocentric Catechesis?', *Origins* 18 (August 4, 1988), pp. 124-7, and the *General Directory for Catechesis* released by the Vatican in 1997 (esp. nn. 97-8). This interest is shared by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, 'The New Covenant: A Theology of Covenant in the New Testament', *Communio: International Catholic Review* 22 (1995), pp. 635-51; and 'Christocentric Preaching', in *The Word: Toward a Theology of the Word*, Readings in Theology, ed. K. Rahner (New York: Kenedy, 1964).

There is much to learn from these scholars and their efforts to overturn reigning paradigms of grace-less moralistic preaching and Christ-less interpretation in the academy are commendable.<sup>22</sup> No doubt many interpreters and pastors are in need of increased sensitivity to the gospel context of the whole Bible. All believers need frequent instruction in the centrality of biblical salvation in the work of Jesus and the way in which the plot of the Scriptures revolves around this salvation. Clearly, there is a need to read and preach Christ throughout the Scriptures, using the methods and objectives for interpretation the NT illustrates for us.<sup>23</sup> It is my contention that Scripture's self-interpretation supports the emphases of the Christ-centred school of interpretation. But is this the only way in which one is to interpret Scripture?

#### PROBLEMS WITH CHRIST-CENTRED PREACHING

Before answering this question by examining Scripture's self-interpretation it is worth noting several aspects of the present Christ-centred movement which suggest a need for balance in rhetoric and praxis.

#### *Reception history*

Quite apart from the observations regarding Scripture's self-interpretation, which will follow this section, the use of the Christocentric model suggests that some modification in nomenclature, content, and dissemination may be required.

#### *Reception History: Lay confusion and a misleading label*

The 'Christ-centred' moniker is a valuable rhetorical and descriptive tool. Yet it can create problems, particularly for lay persons who do not appreciate the nuance found in a number of the scholars cited above. Major labels are powerful forces, and negative criticism about 'moralizing' in sermons and teaching can at times exert more influence than positive affirmations.<sup>24</sup> For instance, my colleagues in ministry in various parts of

<sup>22</sup> One invaluable resource and an excellent entry point are Timothy Keller's sermons. Many of these are available at <http://sermons.redeemer.com/store> (note the 'free samples'); Steve McKoy's listing is well-maintained: [http://www.stevekmccoy.com/reformissionary/2005/07/tim\\_keller\\_arti.html](http://www.stevekmccoy.com/reformissionary/2005/07/tim_keller_arti.html), sites accessed November 12, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> For an excellent, succinct introduction to the use of the OT in the NT which reinforces this point, see S. Motyer, 'Old Testament in the New Testament', in *Evangelical Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. W. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker 1996), pp. 582–5.

<sup>24</sup> Greidanus allows the use of an example to illustrate a point in a sermon (Jas 2 and Heb 11), but disallows making an example a primary point in a sermon.

the country sometimes report dissatisfaction among some leaders and laity influenced by the Christocentric school if their sermons or lessons are not exclusively centred on Christ.

'Christ-centred' is Greidanus's preferred nomenclature for the homiletic method, despite the wider canonical perspective he employs, which would seem to render 'Christian', not Christ-centred or biblical as the appropriate adjective.<sup>25</sup> Chapell likewise broaches a fuller emphasis on 'redemption', which seems to suggest the need for a broader adjective than Christ-centred. In the second edition of *Christ-Centered Preaching* his presentation of the label 'Christ-centred' as 'synecdoche', such that the phrase incorporates all aspects of redemption—the kingdom of God, for example, and some notion of spirit-inspired moral effort—comes as a welcome clarification.<sup>26</sup> But perhaps such confusion warrants a move away from the label, toward a superior term more accurately understood by laypersons, and more capable of embracing the breadth of interpretative concerns found in Scripture. It is worth noting that other pastors and teachers have found alternative labels beneficial.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Reception history: children's literature*

One important barometer, inasmuch as theological and interpretive trends influence educational material, is the fast-selling text for children by Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible*.<sup>28</sup> Its subtitle reveals its affiliation with the Christ-centred school: *Every Story Whispers His Name*. Per Lloyd-Jones's note in her introduction Keller's wife served as 'theological reviewer', and the book reflects the Christocentric emphasis found in Keller's preaching.<sup>29</sup> According to this book Jesus is essentially the sum of what every story is intended to say. I gratefully use this book with my children and appreciate the focus on Jesus in the OT and the way in which fuller aspects of biblical salvation such as the promise of New Creation are addressed. It is refreshing to find a text capable of helping my chil-

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The vociferous opposition to the latter seems to squelch the quiet acceptance of the former.

<sup>25</sup> *Modern Preacher*, pp. 118–9.

<sup>26</sup> 'The Future of Expository Preaching', *Presbyterion* 30 (2004), p. 73; and the second edition of *Christ-Centered Preaching*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> For Fee and Stuart, God is the hero of each OT story, not humans. See, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 81–5. Similarly, one finds a 'theocentric' focus quite apart from the quest for Christ in every single passage in D. Ralph Davis' *The Word Became Flesh: How to Preach Old Testament Narratives* (Fearn: Mentor, 2006), pp. 121–38. Cf. John Piper's preference for the label 'God-centred'.

<sup>28</sup> Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, p. 6.

dren see how *Every Story Whispers His Name*.<sup>30</sup> Yet educational theory and my experience as a parent and educator suggest that a Christ-centred approach to the Bible needs to be augmented by a rich moral formation component.<sup>31</sup>

### *The sermon and its context*

One should not overlook the role liturgy plays in creating a gospel context for sermons. No doubt the creation of such a context requires careful selection of prayers, psalms, corporate readings and other elements of worship. Greidanus holds that early Catholic elevation of Mass and semi-Pelagian theology diminished the concentration on gospel in the sermon and allowed for an increase in moral instruction, so that 'of the four senses, the moral sense gained the upper hand in preaching'.<sup>32</sup> One can envision, however, a healthier theological and liturgical context for moral instruction in sermons. Horton mentions but does not specify 'other contexts' for instruction and education rather than preaching.<sup>33</sup> But are there biblical grounds for making preaching a time where one avoids sustained moral and doctrinal instruction while soteriology must be articulated from the pulpit every week? At least some criticisms I hear from laity are critiques of Sunday School teachers for not featuring a regular diet of gospel, Christ-centred teaching, and, as we shall see, Scripture's moral instruction is far too forceful and frequent to relegate it to Sunday school or similar non-pulpit times.

<sup>30</sup> For a similar approach, relying more on redemptive history than on typology, see David Helm, *The Big Picture Story Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway 2004).

<sup>31</sup> W. Yount, *Created to Learn: A Christian Teacher's Introduction to Educational Psychology* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, p. 105. Clark, 'Letter and Spirit', pp. 333–7 holds that the early Church fathers were responding to moral and doctrinal threats from Gnosticism and charges of immorality from Jews (see esp. 334 n. 8). As a result they gave themselves over to law-centred preaching which continued for over a millennium. But surely they found grounds for emphasising moral effort in Scripture (i.e., the Sermon on the Mount and James)?

<sup>33</sup> I am sympathetic to Horton's criticisms of contemporary preaching, such as 'exegesis of the Constitution' rather than the Bible and the lack of Gospel emphasis in some quarters. Horton's interest in preaching law (but only in conjunction with gospel; again, one wonders if James and the Sermon on the Mount would pass muster) should be noted; I am more concerned about potential abuse of the method in general than with his articulation of the same.

*Overlooking or denigrating the moral use of Scripture*

In some instances one finds the marginalisation and even the denigration of the moral use of Scripture. Chapell's disavowal of 'be like' interpretation mirrors Clowney's admonition to preach 'Christ only' from the life of David: 'We dare not preach David's encounter with Goliath as an example of bravery to be emulated in our conflicts with the 'giants' that assault us. Such an approach trivializes the Old Testament revelation.'<sup>34</sup> Goldsworthy explicitly disavows that moral emphasis could play a significant or central role in Christian preaching and teaching, instead favouring sermons or instruction centred upon the gospel, redemption and Christ.<sup>35</sup> In his treatment of Genesis 22 Greidanus denigrates the efforts of some interpreters because they dare to employ Abraham as an exemplar (in the footsteps of Hebrews and James).<sup>36</sup> Horton provides more balance with his caveat: 'To be sure, Scripture provides God-centred and divinely-revealed wisdom for life, but if this were its primary objective, Christianity would be a religion of self-improvement by following examples and exhortations, not a religion of the Cross.'<sup>37</sup> In principle this is a valuable reminder to celebrate redemption in Christ. In practice, however, the volume and forcefulness of 'Christ-centred' admonitions may lead seminarians, pastors and laity away from deep reflection on the moral use of Scripture in its self-interpretation, described in the following section.

R. P. Gordon targets mere Christocentric interpretation as reductionistic: "'Christ in all the Scriptures" is a slogan that has been misapplied by too many preachers and writers.' Among other problems Gordon holds that Christocentric interpretation sometimes 'diverts attention from other lessons that the biblical text is intended to teach...and inevitably depends for credibility on a principle of selectivity, involving the highlighting of biddable elements in the narrative and the downplaying of others less so.'<sup>38</sup> Of course, sermons with other emphases may also engage in selectivity. But if interpreters consistently fail to follow evidence of Scripture's interest in being interpreted in ways that do not easily fit the description

<sup>34</sup> Clowney, 'Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures', p. 187, cited in Greidanus, *Modern Preacher*, p. 163 n. 19; cf. Clowney, *Unfolding Mystery*, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible*, pp. 115–32.

<sup>36</sup> *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, p. 293 n. 47, citing an 'anonymous preacher' and K. Matthews, 'Preaching Historical Narrative', in *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle*, ed. G. L. Klein, (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 45.

<sup>37</sup> Horton, 'What Are We Looking for in the Bible?', p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> R. P. Gordon, 'A Warranted Version of Historical Biblical Criticism?', in *Behind the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, Scriptures and Hermeneutics 4, ed. Mary Healey, Craig Bartholomew, et al (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 87.

'Christ-centred', the charge of reductionism must be taken seriously and appropriate adjustments to the preferred model of interpretation must be made. Priority must be given to 'Reading the Bible the New Testament Way', which is to say that wise biblical interpreters should carefully attend to Scripture's own self-interpretation, lest a slogan like 'Christ-centred' lead to a one-dimensional approach to a text which demands that interprets itself in variegated fashion.<sup>39</sup> As the next section illustrates Scripture's self-interpretation and explicit purpose statements show that another component that is often not given its due by the Christ-centred school of interpretation.

#### MORAL INSTRUCTION IN SCRIPTURE'S SELF-INTERPRETATION

A variegated approach to interpretation is required if one wishes to portray an accurate reflection of Scripture's intent for Christian interpretation, and particular attention must be given to moral instruction for believers. The present section shows the variety of ways in which Scripture's self-interpretation supports such a conclusion, culminating in the NT's explicit testimony regarding the purpose of Scripture.

#### *Characters and Stories in the New Testament*

##### *Interpretation of characters in the NT (1): OT characters and stories in the NT*

According to Paul these characters were included in the Bible and their stories 'were written for our instruction' (Rom 15:4) and 'as examples' for us (1 Cor 10:6). The contexts of these quotes illustrate Paul's belief that the stories and characters and the successes and failures recorded in the OT inspire and guide our moral effort. According to Paul NT readers do not see Jesus alone in the OT, but rather they see themselves. The book of James references four OT characters and 'the prophets', all of whom are used as examples for the guidance of NT believers (Jas 2:14–26, 5:10–28). James underscores this function by noting that Elijah 'was a man like us' (5:17). The life of Jesus is often an 'expansive echo' of the characters and events of the history of Israel, and these OT stories may rightly be interpreted as pointing to the redemption believers have in Jesus. If Paul is a guide, however, the way in which manna points to the person and work of Christ (John 6:31–60) does not exhaust the interpretive possibilities for manna, for in 2 Corinthians 8:13–15 manna functions as a model for be-

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<sup>39</sup> 'Reading the Bible the New Testament Way' provides an excellent slogan (It is a subtitle in a section of Clark's essay, 'What the Bible is All About', p. 20).

lievers.<sup>40</sup> In this passage and elsewhere God's provision guides the moral effort of believers (cf. Matt 5:43–48). The author of Hebrews appears to challenge Chapell's disavowal of 'be like' interpretation; he repeatedly mentions believers as models of active faith in the face of difficulty (11:2–12:4).<sup>41</sup> Here as elsewhere the NT does not limit itself to a focus upon typological or symbolic relationship between the OT text's events, characters and their offices (including their strengths and weaknesses) and the person and work of Jesus. Moreover, Hebrews has no problem holding out Jesus himself as an example at the conclusion of a long line of OT characters, not because they point only to him, but because these characters and Jesus are useful examples, pushing NT believers to persevering faithfulness and the rejection of entangling sin (Heb 12).

*Interpretation of characters in the NT (2): applying the story of Jesus*

This observation on Hebrews 11:1–12:2 calls to mind the stress on the imitation of Jesus throughout the NT. Elsewhere I have written extensively on the role of Jesus as exemplar in the NT, and will not repeat such material here in detail, save to note Paul's own emphasis.<sup>42</sup> The interpretation of Philippians 2:5–11 in the twentieth century is an example of a text clearly rife with ethical implications. But notable interpreters including E. Käsemann, R. P. Martin, K. Barth, and J. A. Sanders routinely downplayed or even denied such an ethical interpretation in favour of a more strictly Christological or redemptive-historical approach, focusing on the uniqueness of the Christ event. Such a track was often taken over and against the tendency in early Protestant liberalism to reduce Christ to an example.<sup>43</sup> This mistaken interpretation reminds contemporary interpreters of the need to guard against truncating one's interpretative method

<sup>40</sup> See my 'Theology in Action: Paul's Theology of Christian Social Care', in *Transforming the World? The Gospel and Christian Social Care*, eds. J. Grant and D. Hughes (IVP forthcoming, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, at least, feels free to celebrate David and other characters as examples in sermons (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, pp. 150–1). Calvin was clear enough that the interpreter's task also included interpreting Christ from the OT; see his commentary on John 5:39.

<sup>42</sup> On Jesus as exemplar, see my forthcoming articles in *WTJ* (2009); *EvanQ* (2009); Heb 6:12–15; 13:7.

<sup>43</sup> F. Thielman, *Philippians*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 123–5, citing Sanders, 'Dissenting Deities and Phil. 2:6–11', *JBL* 88 (1969), p. 280; Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii.5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 71–3, and *Philippians* TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 99–100, 160.

out of fear that a particular component is employed by an undesirable theological movement.

***Interpretation of characters in the NT (3): Paul's self-application***

1 Corinthians 2:2 is sometimes wrongly cited as evidence for a Christ-only or gospel-only approach. But Paul here is teaching the imitation of Christ. He is describing the way in which he modelled a self-sacrificial lifestyle for the Corinthians, which they are now neglecting. Paul's ministry features the propagation of 'my [cross-imitating] ways in Christ as I am teaching them in every church in every place' (1 Cor 4:17). The Corinthians' failure to follow his Christ-like example led him to send Timothy, who followed Paul's sacrificial ways in Christ so that he could function as an example, a message that is especially clear in 2 Timothy. Elsewhere in this same letter he insists that the church 'imitate me as I imitate Christ' (1 Cor 11:1), as he does throughout the NT.<sup>44</sup>

***Interpretation of characters in the NT (4): characters in parables***

Parables routinely enjoin hearers to imitate a character in a story. Chapell's warning against 'be like' sermons notwithstanding, such a 'be like' emphasis seems entirely appropriate for the interpretation of a number of parables, including the wise builder (Matt 7:24–27), the wise virgins and investors (Matt 25:1–30), and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), which concludes with Jesus' moral exhortation: 'Go and do likewise.'

***Old Testament law in the New Testament***

Granted widespread acceptance of the use of aspects of OT law for moral instruction by Christian interpreters a few examples still aid in ascertaining the relevant presuppositions of the NT authors. Paul is not content to limit himself to the use of the Ten Commandments. In passages such as 1 Corinthians 9:9–10 and 1 Timothy 5:17–18 he also employs so-called ceremonial or civil law in an effort to guide readers' actions, not just to point to Christ and the gospel. Paul surmises that God spoke 'entirely for our sake' (1 Cor 9:9), because God's intention in the OT law is paradigmatic for church life.<sup>45</sup> New Testament believers are routinely called to practice holiness on the basis of God's holiness (1 Pet 1:15–16; Heb 12:14a; cf. Matt

<sup>44</sup> See also Rom 8:17, 36; 15:2–7; 1 Cor 4:8–17; 9; 11:1 (cited); 2 Cor 4:7–18; 12:7–10, 15; 13:3–5; Gal 4:12; Eph 5:2; Phil 2:4–11; 3:10–11; 4:9; Col 1:24; 1 Thess 1:6–7; throughout 2 Timothy; and Acts 20:33–35.

<sup>45</sup> This use of the law is described by G. Wenham, *Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 32–7.

5:48), after the pattern in Leviticus 19:2: ‘Be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.’ In a similar way the command that there should be ‘no poor among you’ (Deut 15:4, 11) likely stands behind the early church’s radical generosity in Acts.<sup>46</sup>

Christ-centred preaching could undercut such an emphasis on moral instruction and direction if ‘Christ-centred’ means that the law is not employed for moral instruction, or if the facts and structure of salvation ‘in Christ’ are elevated in such a way as to mitigate the component of moral instruction. Clark applies the phrase ‘the righteous requirements of the law’ to Jesus’ work on behalf of sinners.<sup>47</sup> This application functions in Clark’s argument as a reason for subordinating law to gospel. But the use of this phrase *for Christ* detracts from a more Pauline approach: believers who ‘walk according to the spirit’ are those in whom the ‘righteous requirement of the law’ is fulfilled (Rom 8:4; cf. Gal 5:22–6:8, esp. 6:2). Christians must receive moral instruction to direct them in their Spirit-led walk, which Paul provides in Romans 12–15 and Galatians 5–6.<sup>48</sup>

### *Old Testament Psalms in the New Testament*

Clowney argues that from the NT’s perspective, all the Psalms are messianic. Scripture gives us permission to read the Psalms in a messianic direction even when explicit pointers to a Messianic figure are not present.<sup>49</sup> His assertion that this can be done for Psalms (and other passages) that the NT does not explicitly use is commendable. But such emphases *must not* overshadow the use of the Psalms in the NT for moral and missional instruction.<sup>50</sup> According to Paul Christians are ‘like sheep to be slaugh-

<sup>46</sup> So I. H. Marshall, *Acts* TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 109.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Letter and Spirit’, pp. 349–50.

<sup>48</sup> Perhaps Clark’s emphasis on preaching law and gospel lead him to the incorporation of moral instruction (which he would limit to the Ten Commandments, the ‘moral law’) in a Christ-centred or gospel-centred framework. But according to Clark the law is not a ‘stimulus to sanctity’ (‘Letter and Spirit’, p. 355). If that is the case, why is that the NT authors use the law to push their readers to holiness and righteousness?

<sup>49</sup> Clowney, *Preaching Christ*, pp. 40–42; Clark, ‘What the Bible is All About’. Tremper Longman III similarly encourages the interpretation of all Psalms as Messianic, relying on Jesus’ statements in Luke 24 as a guide. See, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), pp. 63–73.

<sup>50</sup> On the Psalms’ use of the king as a paradigmatic or exemplary figure see, J. Grant, ‘Psalms and the King’ in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, eds. D. Firth and P. Johnston (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), pp. 114–8, which is based in part on Grant’s published dissertation, *The King as Exemplar: the Function of Deuteronomy’s Kingship Law in the Shaping of the*

tered' (Rom 8:36). This appellation, most often applied to Christ as the consummate righteous sufferer, is here an application of the description of righteous sufferers in Psalm 44:22, and in the context of Romans 8 fleshes out the required task of 'sharing in Christ's sufferings' (8:17). Paul similarly uses Psalm 112:9 as a guide to Christian generosity in 2 Corinthians 8:9.

It is important not to posit a clean break between interpretive focus on Christ and interpretive focus on human effort. Several NT passages illustrate the simultaneous use of a Psalm in both Christological and moral modes. Romans 15:1–7 applies Psalm 40 to Christ, but does so in order to hold out Jesus' sacrificial suffering as an example for believers to imitate in neighbour-service, not crushing those weak in faith nor pleasing only themselves. In a similar way both a believing component (in terms of trust in God) and a moral, striving component (in terms of personal effort) are applied to believers from Psalm 69 by the writer of Hebrews in chapters 3–4. These examples illustrate that, for the NT writers, finding Christ in the OT does not eliminate moral exhortation; it may very well sharpen and enhance it, as Christ is held up as an example.

### *Old Testament prophecy in the New Testament*

The NT's use of prophecy is dominated by Christ-centred appropriation, but this is by no means the only way in which OT prophecy is used. As observed in previous categories a focus on Christ and his people's labours fits together in the NT. Paul's remarkable use of prophecy in Romans 16:20, which echoes Genesis 3:15, invites reflection on the role of believers in redemptive history. Christians are not just spectators in God's victory; they are also *participants*, the means by which God himself brings his victory (John 20:21; Col 1:24; Matt 28:18–20). Jesus similarly ascribes a label from the prophets, 'the light of the world' (Is 42:6, 49:6, 60:3), to himself (John 8) as well as his followers (Matt 5:13–16). Paul cites Isaiah 45:23 in Romans 14:11 in order to provide moral direction to his readers in rendering judgment to God and accepting one another in Christ in light of the future appearance of all before his judgment seat. Matthew's use of prophecy is generally Christocentric. Yet the only prophetic text he cites twice describes both Jesus' salvific mission (Matt 9:13) and the moral judgement expected from God's people (Matt 12:7): 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice' (Hos 6:6).

*Old Testament Wisdom in the New Testament*

Clearly the Proverbs can and should be interpreted in a Christ-centred manner. Yet as Bruce Waltke notes, 'The apostles generally use Proverbs to teach the church how to live godly lives.'<sup>51</sup> An interest in providing such direction for believers explains such the use of Proverbs 3:11–12 in Hebrews 12:5–6; Proverbs 3:34 in James 4:5 and 1 Peter 5:5; Proverbs 25:21–22 in Romans 12:20; and in an allusion to Proverbs 3:7 in 2 Corinthians 8:12. One can contrast such moral instruction with Tremper Longman's introductory section, 'Reading Proverbs in the Light of the New Testament', which addresses only Christocentric interpretation and only mentions the significance of one passage from Proverbs (Prov 8).<sup>52</sup> A wisdom-tinged passage celebrated by Clowney and Clark as a pointer for Christ-centred interpretation, Matthew 11:28–30, in point of fact describes wisdom's dual function in the NT. The point of the passage, not noted by these writers, is that Jesus is the source of wisdom *and* an example; he requires his disciples to follow him ('take my yoke') and imitate his humility and gentleness ('learn from me, for I am...').<sup>53</sup>

*Jesus' sermons in the New Testament*

Not one of Jesus' lengthy teaching blocks or 'sermons' in Matthew could be construed as *primarily* teaching or preaching the person and work of Jesus.<sup>54</sup> Instead, they work out the implications of Jesus' identity in areas such as the nature of God's kingdom, Christian mission and ethics, and temporal and final judgement. The use of Jesus' own words in the remainder of the NT confirm an interest in moral interpretation; Paul employs them so as to shed light on the moral example he has offered his flock in Ephesus (Acts 20:33–35).

*Old Testament motivations in the New Testament*

Fear of the Lord, reward for one's labours, and the threat of divine judgement all function as motivators to enjoin believers to faithfulness. The NT shares the OT's concern to put such motivators to work in procla-

<sup>51</sup> *Proverbs 1–15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 126.

<sup>52</sup> T. Longman III, *Proverbs*, BECOTPW (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 64–9. Given the academy's resistance to interpreting Jesus in the OT, scholars are commendably fighting an uphill battle in placing Jesus on the map of OT interpretation at all.

<sup>53</sup> Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*, pp. 42–3; Clark, 'Letter and Spirit', pp. 362–3.

<sup>54</sup> Matt 5–7; 10; 13; 18; 23–25; see my forthcoming article in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (2009) on the extent of these passages and implications for their interpretation.

mation. Luke even describes such exhortation as ‘gospel proclamation’ (Luke 3:7–18). Such variegated motivation calls into question an insistence on the exclusive use of gospel as sanctification for believers.

### *History of interpretation and proclamation*

Two historical facets of biblical interpretation also shed light on Christian interpretive method, although both must be treated very briefly. First, contemporaneous exegetical practices in Judaism, while obviously lacking the crucial Christological component, confirm the present assertion that the biblical writers freely employed the Scripture for moral, didactic training. Brian Rosner’s observation summarises the relationship adequately for our purposes here: ‘Virtually without exception, [early] Judaism presents a powerful demonstration of Paul’s notion that Scripture was written to teach us how to live.’<sup>55</sup> This emphasis is not lost when Paul or others add a Christ-centred component, for as noted above, the moral use is frequently *enhanced* when Christological interpretation is present.

Secondly, expositors throughout history have employed more than a bare Christ-centred approach. Not surprisingly, they have incurred critique from the Christ-centred school. Calvin routinely employs biblical characters as examples for moral instruction in his theologising, commentating and preaching, against which Greidanus levies rather unfortunate criticisms. In his first sermon on Job 1:1 Calvin states: ‘[I]t is good that we have examples who show us that there are men frail like us, who nevertheless have resisted temptations, and have persevered constantly in obeying God, although He afflicted them to the limit. Now we have here an excellent example of it.’ In Calvin’s thought, Job is an excellent example, and should be preached as such.<sup>56</sup> Again, in light of the use of Abraham in James 2, Hebrews 11, and John the Baptist’s preaching in Matthew 3 and Luke 3, Calvin is in fact expositing Genesis 22 in accord with NT interpretation of the OT when he describes Abraham as ‘entirely devoted to God’ in Genesis 22. He surmises that Scripture’s depiction of the patriarch is an ‘example proposed for our imitation’. Greidanus, however, critiques the use of Abraham as exemplar throughout his analysis of Genesis 22, and particularly calls Calvin’s interpretation of Genesis into question.<sup>57</sup> For Greidanus, even if Abraham could be an *illustration* of

<sup>55</sup> Rosner, ‘“Written for us”: Paul’s View of Scripture’, in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, eds. D. Wright and P. Satterthwaite (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 102.

<sup>56</sup> Cited by Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, p. 150 n. 58.

<sup>57</sup> *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* 292–318, esp. 303 n. 49. To Calvin’s Genesis commentary, add the use of Abraham in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.10:11.

faithfulness and faith that works appropriately, such texts could perhaps be referenced (he cites Jas 2 and Heb 11), but never preached without elevating Christ.<sup>58</sup>

As he targets ‘anthropocentric interpretation’ and moralism, Greidanus attributes an early moralising ‘slide’ to Clement of Rome, denigrating his use of OT characters as exemplars.<sup>59</sup> Clark similarly believes that various social and theological factors contributed to a loss of pure gospel presentation (he cites 1 Cor 1–2) in the early church fathers.<sup>60</sup> But it is difficult to believe that Clement could have instigated any sort of ‘slide’ toward moral instruction, since antecedent NT passages such as Hebrews 10:36–12:2 and James 2:14–26 and 5:10–18 already feature the use of OT characters as examples of enduring fidelity and righteousness. In light of Christian and early Jewish use of characters for moral instruction Clement has not fallen from the heights of some well-worn, pristine Christ-centred interpretation of the OT from the apostolic era.<sup>61</sup>

### *The New Testament’s explicit purpose statements*

No doubt the examples of moral instruction in the previous categories could be multiplied. Clowney surmises, ‘It is true that the New Testament does not often speak of the way it interprets the Old, and we are often left to draw our own conclusions.’ He concludes that the ‘grand structure’ of the NT’s use of the OT leads us to feature Jesus as ‘the fulfillment, the realization of what was anticipated’ in the OT.<sup>62</sup> This latter statement is true, but the former statement must be tempered by the way in which Paul variously summarises the interpretation of the OT. Careful examination shows that he does not do so in a merely Christ-centred manner. As noted previously, for Paul, the Scriptures are written ‘for our instruction’ in be-

<sup>58</sup> *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, p. 305.

<sup>59</sup> *Modern Preacher*, p. 116. Blame for Clement is also found in Goldsworthy who decries the early Christian ‘concentration on the exemplary and ethical Christ, rather than on the substitutionary and redemptive Christ’. See his, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), pp. 92-3. See especially *1 Clem* 4:1–12:8. Against this view of the history of interpretation a moral sense is already profoundly important in the NT itself, as it was in early Jewish interpretation.

<sup>60</sup> Clark, ‘Letter and Spirit’, pp. 333-7.

<sup>61</sup> Nor an interest in characters as exemplars among early Jewish and Christian authors should be attributed to Hellenization, according to Michael Crosby. See his, *Rhetorical Composition and Function of Hebrews 11 in Light of Example Lists in Antiquity* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988), p. 109.

<sup>62</sup> Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*, p. 20.

havioural matters (Rom 15:4 in light of 15:1–7), and characters and events were ‘written down for our instruction’ (1 Cor 10:11) ‘as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did’ (10:6). The belief in Scripture as a guide led Paul to surmise that *every* Scripture ‘is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work’ (2 Tim 3:16–17).

Failing to attend to these explicit statements of moral intent Christ-centred interpreters in some instances over-interpret other passages, attempting to prove that the NT itself teaches a thoroughgoing Christ-centred method. Luke 24:27 probably does not teach that every single OT passage points directly to Jesus. Rather, Jesus teaches that his identity and mission can be found *in many passages* from all over Scripture. This point receives further clarification both in extent (Jesus can be preached from the Law, prophets, and Psalter) and in content (Jesus’ suffering, death, resurrection on the third day and reception in glory; and repentance and forgiveness being proclaimed everywhere, beginning in Jerusalem) in several verses in the immediate context (Luke 24:25–26, 44–47).<sup>63</sup> Dan G. McCartney holds that the latter passage from Luke 24 teaches us that Jesus is something of a ‘skeleton key’ for interpreting the OT; ‘it appears that Jesus is giving the disciples the key to understanding the Old Testament as a whole.’<sup>64</sup> Such an assertion is not wrong, but if not properly nuanced it encourages a loss of focus on Scripture’s broader intentions and opens the door to a failure to honour the moral instruction component of Scripture.

Paul charges Timothy, ‘You have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus’ (2 Tim 3:15 NIV). Like Luke 24:27 this verse is also cited as a passport to the interpretation of Christ in all the Scriptures.<sup>65</sup> It is true that 2 Timothy 3:15–17 summarises Scripture’s utility, just as it summarises its *theopneustos* character. But wisdom for salvation in Jesus, according to this passage, is not the limit, nor always even the goal of Christian interpretation (though Christian interpretation must never be opposed to this). Rather, good works are the *telos*, and *all* Scripture is to be used to this end

<sup>63</sup> Pace Clowney, *Preaching Christ* 39–40. Davis is particularly helpful in identifying concerns regarding the use of Luke 24 (*Word Became Flesh* 134–138).

<sup>64</sup> “The New Testament’s Use of the Old Testament,” in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, a Challenge, a Debate* (ed. Harvie M. Conn, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 109, 113–4, 116. Cf. *English Standard Version Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008) 23.

<sup>65</sup> Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible* 84–5, noted above.

in 'teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness'. These tasks, not the articulation of 'wisdom for salvation in Christ', explicitly describe the utility of *all of Scripture*.<sup>66</sup>

Paul's purpose statements explicitly contradict what must be regarded as poorly nuanced statements in Goldsworthy, Chapell and others which (intentionally or unintentionally) move believers away from attending to Scripture's self-interpretation for the moral instruction of believers. 2 Timothy 3:15–17 and 1 Corinthians 10 both illustrate that moral instruction is not contrary to interpreting Christ from the OT. In the latter passage, however, it is worth noting that he draws attention to Christ in the OT ('the rock was Christ', 10:4) not to clarify Christian salvation, but to clarify and sharpen the relevance of the OT passage he has mined for Christian moral instruction.<sup>67</sup>

### Summary

If Scripture is to be the guide for Christian interpretation, its explicit statements of intent and the patterns of interpretation modelled therein reveal that Christian preaching not only *may* but *must* feature moral exhortation. Therefore, Christ-centred interpretation that overlooks, explicitly excludes, or denigrates the use of moral examples and moral instruction in preaching requires considerable modification.<sup>68</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Practitioners concerned to preach and interpret biblically must pay careful attention to the articulation of God's good news. Opportunities to impress God's grace on the fallen and forgetful must not be overlooked. Preachers must also attend to the diverse ways in which the Bible itself

<sup>66</sup> Rom 15:4 seems to be similarly comprehensive in scope. Chapell attempts to account for 2 Tim 3:16–17, but it is unclear that his model is capable of fostering the degree of moral instruction advocated by Paul. In the second edition of *Christ-Centered Preaching*, see pp. 49–53, 269 and 378. On the latter page his use of this passage morphs quickly into 'proclamation of the gospel' and 'convinc[ing] others to put their trust in [Jesus]'.

<sup>67</sup> One wonders if 2 Tim 3:15 is therefore explicated in 3:16–17, with the soteriological aspect in view in 3:15 thus understood in a holistic sense along the lines of Phil 2:13.

<sup>68</sup> I encourage students (and laypersons with criticisms!) to ask diagnostic questions of their preferred model of interpretation: 'Does my model of interpretation render the book of James sub-Christian?' 'If my pastor [teacher, campus minister] simply reads the book of James, would he fail my litmus test as a biblical expositor?'

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teaches us to use the length and breadth of God's Word for moral instruction. The depth of the NT's interest in Christian moral formation requires preachers and teachers to engage such material frequently and in detail. Claims that we *only* teach and preach Christ and that *every* sermon must be focused squarely on Christ are misguided. At the same time, however, it is crucial for Christians to employ the Christocentric use of the OT, recognising that the NT itself models such interpretation. I respect the efforts of scholar-expositors mentioned herein to overturn the pattern of reading Christ *out* of the OT, particularly in light of the failure of interpreters in previous generations to incorporate Christ-centred interpretation into their moral instruction and doctrinal preaching.

This essay is not intended as a full-fledged assault on the Christ-centred school, a movement with which I identify and whose observations I employ in my own ministry. I simply wish to encourage interpreters and preachers to follow Scripture's lead in implementing a diverse approach to biblical interpretation that honours the moral component of Scripture's self-interpretation. Whatever one labels one's interpretive method this moral component cannot be overlooked, mitigated, or disparaged if we are to use 'every Scripture' as the NT teaches us (2 Tim 3:16–17).