

EDITORIAL

“Should we ‘unhitch’ the New Testament from the Old?” was doubtless one of the most frequently asked questions in popular circles this past year, and the debate continues to resonate. While this is certainly not a new question in scholarly circles (it is at least as old as Marcion), a popular pastor raised the issue in a widely circulated and much-reviewed book that generated considerable discussion and brought this issue to the attention of a broader population. We can be grateful to that pastor for raising the question, even though, I suspect, most of us would not agree with his answer if the largely negative reviews of his book are any indication. To tip my hat right at the outset, I certainly would take issue with the proposition that we should “unhitch” the OT from the NT if by that we mean that we should no longer preach from the OT in our churches and focus instead exclusively on the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ.

On the most foundational level, such an argument is unduly dichotomous, drawing too sharp a dividing line between the Testaments (if not falling into the trap of some kind of neo-Marcionism). Augustine famously declared in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount that the “*New Testament* lies hidden in the Old and the *Old Testament* is unveiled in the New.” It is easy to forget that the early church used the OT as their “Scriptures” and that every reference to the “Scriptures” in the NT has the OT in view. Far from being “unhitched” from the OT, the early church used it at every turn, both explicitly and as a substratum for its teaching and preaching. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that according to the gospel he received, “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4). He also wrote to the same audience, “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:11); and similarly wrote to Timothy, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). What these passages show, I believe—and many more could be cited—is that for Paul and the early Christians, the core message of the NT was embedded in the OT and “hitched” to it.

The question of the exact nature of the relationship between the OT and the NT, of course, has been the subject of extensive and lively scholarly discussion over the past centuries. A helpful work in this regard is David L. Baker’s *Two Testaments, One Bible: The Theological Relationship between the Old and New Testaments* (3rd ed.; IVP Academic, 2010). After surveying the biblical foundation (the OT view and the NT view) and the history of interpretation, Baker discusses four modern solutions: (1) the NT as the essential Bible; (2) the two Testaments as equally Christian Scripture; (3) the OT as the essential Bible; and (4) the two Testaments as one salvation history. He continues with a discussion of four key themes: (1) typology; (2) prom-

ise and fulfillment; (3) continuity and discontinuity; and (4) covenant; and concludes with his own adjudication of the issue with implications for theology and the church. I believe if a book such as this were required reading before a popular pastor or author speaks out on a complex issue such as this, the debate would be conducted on a much more solid footing. But this may be the ideal world of a seminary professor! In real life, especially in this fast-paced, social media-driven world, people often speak out without thorough grounding on a given issue, and frequently without formal theological training, and as a result expose gaps in their understanding and potentially lead their followers astray.

The driving impetus seems to be to make the Christian message more palatable to the unchurched. To the extent that such discussions are driven by practical concerns, they can be valuable. As preachers of God's Word, we certainly don't want to bore people with irrelevant information or alienate them from the gospel. But the key, deep-level questions everyone has to deal with—those related to origin, identity, purpose, and destiny—have significant grounding in the OT. When NT writers teach on marriage, for instance, where do they go? Genesis 2:24, again and again. "Have you not read?" To give another example, when addressing today's debates on homosexuality, ἀρσενοκοίτης in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 finds grounding in Leviticus legislation, which is rooted in the Decalogue, which arguably springs from God's creative purpose for humankind—connections which have obvious implications.

If the relationship between the Testaments is framed in this way, the question is not primarily one of exegesis or hermeneutics but one of proper contextualization. It's not a matter of *whether* we should preach from the OT but *how* we should do so. The best preachers I've heard on this subject are those who identify a gospel connection between a given OT passage and the NT and who lead their audience to the cross of Christ in such a way that the connection is organic and legitimate rather than contrived. Of course, much here depends on the larger theological system of a given preacher or theologian; those accentuating continuity will handle the text differently than those who operate on the assumption of a more pronounced discontinuity between the Testaments. Others will try to steer a middle ground between the two, whether progressive dispensationalism, progressive covenantalism, an emphasis on the NT revelation of previously unrevealed salvation-historical "mysteries," or some other *via media*.

One of the most fruitful avenues of exploration will likely focus on the NT use of the OT. The *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Baker, 2007) is a treasure trove in this regard. What a close study of the NT use of the OT reveals is that Jesus and the NT writers did not use the OT indiscriminately but rather did so selectively and judiciously. Here, Douglas Moo's distinction between hermeneutical axioms and appropriation techniques continues to be helpful. The primary axiom, of course, is Christological, the assumption that Jesus was the Messiah predicted and typologically foreshadowed in every part of the Hebrew Scriptures (see esp. Luke 24:26–27, 44–47). This axiom also has important entailments with regard to covenant, priesthood, and the sacrificial system, as the book of Hebrews demonstrates—although it is vital to recognize

that Jesus set aside entire swaths of OT legislation (Mark 7:19). Another important line of inquiry relates to the role of the law both in OT times and in the life of the Christian. Here Paul's discussions in Galatians 3 and Romans 6–8 point the way (not to mention Jesus's own words in Matt 5:17–20). In this regard, I would recommend that you listen to a recent podcast with D. A. Carson on the TGC website: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/tgc-podcast/need-jesus-need-old-testament>. As Don points out—rightly, in my opinion—matters are not quite as simple as merely asserting that the Ten Commandments still apply to Christians as part of the OT moral law. Tom Schreiner says something similar in a related essay (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/old-covenant-response-andy-stanley>).

As we've seen, the relationship between the OT and the NT is complex and requires nuanced discussion; simplistic either-or propositions are inadequate. While the OT by itself is incomplete, the NT by itself lacks the necessary narrative and theological underpinnings that make sense of its teachings. That said, a good number of the well-meaning defenses of the relevance of the OT I've seen may have overreacted to the proposal to “unhitch” the NT from the OT. To my mind, at least, asserting the continuing relevance of portions of the OT when the NT has abrogated aspects of it is not the answer. Perhaps to some extent this is a matter of perspective; as a NT scholar, I may be expected to appreciate the contribution of the NT more than others who have not made the study of the NT a lifelong passion. At the risk of sounding dichotomous myself, I believe there is clearly a sense in which the NT is preeminent in the way in which it narrates the coming of Jesus the Messiah and his establishment of a new covenant (though patterns of OT fulfillment are everywhere to be found), and so we should read the OT in light of the NT. To be sure, we don't want to preach a truncated gospel, but the gospel does point to Jesus as he is presented in the NT Gospels and explained in the NT epistles (take Jesus's interchange with Nicodemus in John 3, for example, where he relates his cross-death typologically to the Numbers account of Moses' lifting up of the bronze serpent in the wilderness and alludes to Ezekiel's prophecy regarding the new birth, not to mention the likely allusion to Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac in the evangelist's well-known commentary in verse 16). In defending the OT's relevance, we therefore need not level the playing field entirely and put the OT on par with the NT (even though both are inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Scripture).

The discussion will no doubt continue. Much more could, and probably should, be said. In the compass of a brief editorial, I must be content to sketch the contours of the discussion and to point in the direction of what seem to me to be fruitful avenues of exploration. There is no substitute for a thorough immersion in the Scriptures themselves, both OT and NT, just as there is no substitute for a solid course of theological education. The present debate also highlights the need for theological preaching, even beyond mere expository preaching, that helps people in our congregations understand the underlying dynamic in the biblical storyline and find their identity within it. The resurgence of biblical theology in the evangelical world is certainly cause for optimism that the widespread biblical illiteracy can be remedied, at least to some extent, by a new generation of preachers who are more

biblically informed and theologically astute. The topic cries out for a love of God's Word that fuels a deeper relationship with our Lord and Savior who is at the center of all biblical revelation. To him be all the glory, and honor, and praise, now and forever! Amen.

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