

# Some Considerations Regarding the Importance of Using the Old Testament in Sermons and Teaching

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**ABSTRACT:** In the light of preaching the Christian doctrines for the Church, the focus is usually on using New Testament texts as the main foundation. This may come out because of the way preachers and teachers were formed in the theological seminaries or just because they copy each other when it comes about transmitting the doctrine to the next generation. That makes the teaching and preaching of the Old Testament a secondary issue. For these people and their local church members seems that by focusing on the New Testament texts the Christians feel more appropriate to the right doctrines because they study the sayings and writings of Jesus and his apostles. But such actions have their outcomes. Therefore, this paper will focus on discovering if there is any importance at all in using Old Testament texts for transmitting doctrine and not just some life examples or faith heroes' stories and if these are important for the spiritual formation of every Christian and especially for the newly converted ones. The process will start with an analysis of the use and meaning of the Old Testament scriptures for Jesus, his disciples, and the apostle Paul. Then it will continue observing what some other Christian theologians have to say about that, concluding in if it is worthy or not to focus on Old Testament scriptures for doctrine and life changing teachings.

**KEYWORDS:** Old Testament, teaching, preaching, OT scriptures, OT importance, OT doctrine, Christian formation

## **Introduction**

Among some Christian preachers and teachers today there is a tendency to leave the teaching or learning of the Old Testament in the background. At first glance, the main reason is an understanding that in this way Christians will be closer to what the apostles and the Lord Jesus were and did. But this trend also brings with it its consequences. As a result, it is important to consider an analysis of the importance of Old Testament preaching and teaching for believers in the Church, and especially of new believers who will be formed from the beginning based on what is presented to them as important. The danger of treating the Scriptures in a dichotomist way is damaging for the Church, especially because it orphans it of the great beauties and riches contained by the Old Testament. Once the Old Testament is out of the way, there remains little to strengthen or understand doctrines as creation, origins, God's person, character, and ways of treating his people and other nations.

Its origins in the Old Testament Scriptures are overlooked by some Christian ministers, preachers, and teachers. The news of the Holy Spirit poured over it to lead and empower, and the faulty understanding of some Scriptures lead to some improper actions on the part of those responsible to teach the Word of God. Sometimes the start can be triggered by the very way the use of the word “Scriptures” is understood. Most of the times the Christians will suppose it refers to the whole Bible. Of course, in some cases, by extension, one could understand it that way. What if it should be kept mainly to its first meaning? What would surface because of it?

## The meaning of the word “Scripture” in the NT

### *The way it is used*

In the New Testament, the words Scripture (31 times) and Scriptures (20 times) are used 51 times to translate the Greek word γραφή (*graphē*) which could simply refer to a writing or some writings (Strong 1890, s.v. G1124) and one time the word γράμμα (*gramma*) which could refer to a letter, a document or a sacred writing (Strong 1890, s.v. G1121). Of course, due to the context it becomes clear that the writings it refers to are none other than the writings of the Old Testament, therefore the decision of the translators to use the word Scripture/Scriptures. This is fine as long as there is a recognition of the fact that these words refer purely to the Old Testament Scriptures. As soon as these words are interpreted as referring to the writings or the books of the New Testament there arise new problems. Of course, there are a couple of instances where one should agree that these words could apply by extension to the Scriptures of the New Testament, too.

Besides these there are a lot of phrases that look like: „it is written” (Mat. 2:5; 4:4, 6, 7, 10), „according to what it is written” (Mark 1:2), „because it is written”, „is it not written that” (Mark 11:17), „the prophets prophesied about” (Luke 1:70; 24:25), „it is true what Isaiah prophesied” (Mat. 15:7, Mark 7:6), „to fulfill all the things written in the prophets” (Mat. 26:56), „it is written in the prophets” (John 6:45), „David... prophesied about the resurrection of the Christ” (Acts 2:30-31), „spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:18, 21, 24), „all the prophets testify about Him” (Acts 10:43), „they fulfilled the word of the prophets” (Acts 13:27).

All of these are parts of the statements made by the Lord Jesus and his disciples: Philip, John, Peter, James. Some of them can also be found in the Apostle Paul’s discourses or letters. One thing is clear that even these refer to the things that were written in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Therefore, every Christian should be aware that the Old Testament scriptures were of great importance to the New Testament writers. They based their writings to the Church on them. At that time, it probably did not even occur to them that one day their writings would be placed in a canon and called scriptures alongside those of the OT. A good question would be: What would Matthew, Mark, Luke, Peter, Paul, James, Judas, and John say today if they heard how often Christians allude to their scriptures as scriptures?

New Testament people were mighty in the Old Testament Scriptures: The Lord Jesus, Stephan the deacon, the apostle Paul, and Apollo. They overturned the arguments of the Judaizers, and Jewish so-called believers. And all of them used the Scriptures in their public messages.

### *Is the Gospel part of the Old Testament?*

Another important part of this construct is the way the Gospel is contained in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Although there will be no presentation of that in this study, the first person to use the OT Scriptures to explain the Gospel was the Lord Jesus on the road to Emmaus. He used the Scriptures written by Moses and all the prophets and stated that even His resurrection was to be believed based on the OT Scriptures.

The next in line was Philip who presented Christ and his death and resurrection based on the Text of Isaiah 53. These can be proofs that the OT contains more than just a history of the Jewish nation and some prophecies for future reference. Even the Apostle Paul states that the Gospel itself is contained by the OT Scriptures: “the gospel of God, which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures” (Rom. 1:1-2). One of the most important things of the Gospel and Lord Jesus is the fact that He is not just a historical figure, but a prophesied historical figure. It means that to believe in a historical person, somebody who lived on this earth is not that hard, especially when there is some archeological or historical evidence. But to see that a historical person was prophesied about many hundreds of years before that is a great miracle. And these things are part of the OT Scriptures.

In comparison to these methods of using the Scriptures, nowadays Christians base a lot of their preaching and evangelistic messages on Bible verses from the New Testament. Some might wonder if there is more efficiency in proceeding like or in using OT Scriptures, too.

### **Stating the main problems among evangelicals**

Among the charismatic circles and not only there is an emphasis on using „the new wine in new wine skins”. It refers to the fact that now is the age of the Church and the old things of the OT should be left behind. It emphasizes that the main things the Church needs are given by the Holy Spirit and therefore the focus should be on a new anointing of the Spirit. These ideas are slowly spreading into the more conservative churches and, for many believers it induces the idea that there is not much need of the Old Testament. It has become unimportant, and the believers should focus mainly on the ministries of the Holy Spirit. These ideas miss to mention that the very doctrine of the pouring of the Holy Spirit was prophesied before the Age of the Church, and it is written in the OT Scriptures.

This trend is found even in the more conservative churches. Charles Andrew Stanley, known as Andy Stanley, a prominent pastor and speaker of a nondenominational network of churches used to be a member of the Southern Baptist. Although his background is more of a conservator, he wrote a column in the online Christian platform of Relevant Magazine (Stanley 2019) and a book called: *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World*. In both, he claims that the Church should stop focusing on the Old Testament. This paper will not treat statements of his book, only some mentioned in his column as these are the first hands on material for the larger Christian community. He encourages the believers to stop fulfilling the Old Testament commandments because they are related and dependent on the old covenant. Now, because the Christian believers are bound to a new covenant, they should not submit to any of the things contained in the first part of their Bibles (Stanley 2019). More on this will be developed in the later part of this paper. It is worth mentioning that theologies developed in the west reach countries in the east, and one of them is Romania.

Referring to the situation in Romania, it seems that because the Scriptures are not sufficiently read and known by Christian believers, there arises an imbalance provoked by the supposed fact that the Law and the Gospel are antagonistic. Some in the Romanian churches will use other synonym terms: old covenant and new covenant; or the Law and the Grace. More and more preachers and teachers of the Bible in Romania focus their attention mainly on the New Testament and although they often cite Old Testament verses, commandments, or prophecies as they read the Scriptures in the Church or during their presentations, they forget to grant the right importance to them. For example, they forget that even the claim that the righteous will live by faith is not a doctrine defined by the apostle Paul but a quote he borrowed from the writings of prophet Habakkuk (Hab. 2:4) of the Old Testament.

Every believer needs to be able to defend his faith and even counterattack evolutionary, atheistic, and postmodern ideas. Fundamental teachings on these subjects can be found in the Old Testament. To know them requires explanations and examples of discussions that cover the full range of ideas to which believers may be exposed.

Some of the newly converted Christians come from different social backgrounds, and struggle with ideas that come from atheism, evolutionism, magic and witchcraft, the New Age, and urgently need appropriate answers. For example, the knowledge that divination, magic, and sorcery are an abomination to God and that He forbids their practice is taken from the pages of the Old Testament. The New Testament mentions the burning of witchcraft books, the release of a maid who had a spirit of divination, and a sorcerer named Simon. In the same vein, William Dyrness says that "when missionaries and pastors base their entire preparation on the New Testament, they cannot give the Word of God all its power" (Dyrness 2010, 13).

Yet, Walter C. Kaiser formulates the start of the battle against the Old Testament first in the second century under Marcion influence and then a renewal of that at the Sport Palace demonstration of Berlin German Christians on November 13, 1933 (Kaiser 1991, 14-15). In his view the problem gets more complicated because of the influence of Friederick Delitzsch, F. Nietzsche, Adolf Harnack, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. This is a topic that will not be developed in this study.

### **The need and response in the Church**

If the books of the Bible were divided proportionally, those in the Old Testament form about three-quarters. One of the simple rules of biblical hermeneutics says that when there is a large amount of text allocated to a subject, it means that it must be an important topic. This simple fact should be considered when encountering the Scripture.

The content of the OT Scriptures was used by the Lord Jesus and the apostles as the Scriptures. Their life was formed in the social-religious context prepared by the principles of the Old Testament. None of them rejected the Scriptures or repudiated them, on the contrary, they pointed to concrete situations through which the Scriptures were fulfilled and to concrete situations that served them and other Christians as examples to follow or avoid.

Samuel Schultz, professor of the Old Testament, states that Christians should accept the Old Testament as a supreme authority. He founds his claim on the fact the Jewish people of old and the early Church treated it that way (Schultz 2008, 19). L. Gaussen, professor of systematic theology adds to this. "Nowhere shall we find a single passage that permits us to detach one single part of it as less divine than all the rest." (Gaussen 1867, 67). In his view, all the Word of God is prophetic and should be considered more than just a simple utterance from God. It is the "oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2) which means that it is the very "verbal and complete inspiration" (Gaussen 1867, 68).

A reason why preachers and teachers should emphasize the teaching and learning of the Old Testament in a balanced way is to repair the imbalance caused by the "deficiencies" of knowledge and interpretation of the Old Testament. As Eroll Hulse put it: "We should never place the law and the gospel in opposite positions. One is a complete complement to the other. They are the twin pillars of God's temple" (Hulse 2012, 235). Walter C. Kaiser takes a plastic picture of this by presenting it in quarters, of which three are allocated to the Old Testament (Kaiser 1991, 29). If the believers do not know the Old Testament, then they will have gaps, lacunae and imbalances that can inevitably lead to one or more of the following consequences: a lack of trust in God's faithfulness, a lack of knowledge of God's person and attributes, a misunderstanding of certain actions in the New Testament, lack of power in the face of pro-evolution attacks, the tendency to have anti-Semitic impulses, disinterest in having an apologetic attitude for the Christian faith.

The preachers and teachers must keep in mind that in society, every Christian needs to be strengthened in faith, to be able to respond in an appropriate way to any influences and to take the right stance in any situation. Besides these, Richard J. Foster warns the leaders to keep in mind that "God has given the spiritual life disciplines to ordinary people who go to work, have children to raise, wash dishes, and mow the grass," (Foster 1996, 9). In all these situations, the areas most affected are about the creation, the person of God and the fulfillment of God's words. These areas find their most relevant answers only if the Old Testament is included in the teaching and learning of Christians.

Regarding daily life and challenges, practical examples are to be found all over in the Old Testament. Every person is guided in life also by the model of those people he considers to be his "heroes". The Old Testament abounds in heroes of the faith, some of whom are mentioned in the New Testament (Heb. 11). Especially for the children of the believers, the attitude, and actions of people like: Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Ruth, Samuel, David, Esther, Daniel, and others are inspirational. They bring simple encouragements for difficult situations, and challenge

them to be steadfast in their decisions, patience, perseverance, prayer, etc. Most of these decisions become a way of life for them even when they have already become adults.

Sometimes, adults look in a different way at the examples from the Old Testament: both the positive ones and the negative ones, being aware of the lessons to be learned. In the same way, the apostle Paul encourages the knowledge of the Old Testament (1 Cor. 10:1-11). He challenges the believers to a beautiful, temperate experience, concretely exemplifying with the "parables" from which he extracts the exhortations he gives. The same results can be expected today from believers who, encouraged by each minister, come to choose what is good and pleasing before God. This will have a good and pleasant effect on other people in the family and community.

Looking further into the future, Christians expect to live an eternal life with God. But the eternal dimension of God, in terms of the past, is best understood in the Old Testament. That is where God revealed His Name, attributes, and plans. When church ministers also preach and teach the Old Testament, it gives believers, and especially new converts, a whole picture of the person of God. Graeme Goldsworthy observes that "the New Testament takes us back to the Old Testament, because it always assumes that the Old Testament is the basis of the gospel" (Goldsworthy 2008, 53). These should lead the preachers and teachers who think in these terms to press harder to a better knowledge and understanding of the Old Testament. By doing so, they will help themselves and their Christian community to identify the character of God more easily, and to observe that the New Testament brings continuity to the plans God has made, prophecies are fulfilled, doctrines are explained, and in this way the content of the New Testament will be identified more accurately and approached with a lot more confidence. An example could be the one mention above about the difference between a historical Jesus and a prophesied historical Jesus. The very Jesus that fulfilled the prophecies. This can also serve as an impetus to read and study the Holy Scriptures to understand God's plans as deeply as possible.

In the same frame of mind, believers could be amazed to see God's boundless love and wisdom in the very plan of salvation. To understand as Mark Dever points out that "Jesus, our interceding priest, offers us a new relationship with God by unraveling the mystery of the Old Testament: how the Lord can 'forgive iniquity' and yet 'not count the guilty as innocent'?" (Dever 2011, 34), can produce in the lives of believers and new converts a firm desire to respond with devotion to the One who made salvation possible.

Another problem would be a dichotomy in the way Christians approach the Scriptures. Usually, they use the New Testament for teaching, and when they are, I need emotional fulfillment to soothe the pain or encourage the joy for worship they will mostly use the book of Psalms. Williams Dyrness comes along and sees that

*"Christians often spend most of their time studying the New Testament, occasionally making incursions into Psalms and Proverbs and sometimes into Prophets. The result is that many Christians fail to understand the full scope of God's self-revelation — they have an incomplete picture of God's purposes."* (Dyrness 2010, 13)

The opposite of this situation is when God's purposes are understood, because the Old Testament is properly treated in terms of reading, learning, and teaching. Church leaders have a duty to help believers understand God's purposes. For example, the apostle Peter says that believers must be holy in all their conduct and quotes, "Be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:16), an expression that, in the Romanian Dumitru Cornilescu's translation, appears exactly the same four times in the Old Testament (Lev. 11:44; 11:45; 19:2 and 20:26). In this regard, it can be seen that God wants His people to be holy, and He sets Himself an example for them. In Mark Dever's words, "The Old Testament ... shows us God's passion for holiness." (Dever 2011, 28). For new converts, hearing this can encourage them to be diligent and attentive, taking every aspect and situation of life seriously.

William Dyrness is convinced of the need to teach and learn the Old Testament, not just for the new converts and ordinary believers. He expands the area to preachers and teachers when he says, "I believe that all theologians should have a period of discipleship in the Old Testament" (Dyrness 2010, 9). Of course, it is impossible for someone to take another person beyond the point he has personally reached. For new converts and believers to come to love the Old Testament with God's teachings, characters, examples, commandments, purposes, and plans; those who teach them need to have loved it first.

### ***The case of Andy Stanley's theology regarding the Old Testament***

Walter C. Kaiser rings a bell about the false assumptions of the believers regarding the message of the Old Testament. One of them is the tendency to believe that its message is irrelevant for today's generation (Kaiser, Davids, Bruce, and Brauch 1996, 7). This sets him on the very opposite side of Andy Stanley who considers that the Old Testament message should be covered and forgotten once for all because Jesus did so with the old covenant and therefore Christians should live the new covenant. Stanley comes in stating that *John 13:34* "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." is a command that replaces all the commandments of the Old Testament, including the Ten Commandments. He claims that

*"Jesus issued his new commandment as a replacement for everything in the existing list. Including the big ten. Just as his new covenant replaced the old covenant, Jesus' new commandment replaced all the old commandments. Participants in the new covenant (that's Christians) are not required to obey any of the commandments found in the first part of their Bibles."*  
(Stanley 2019)

What he fails to see is that firstly, this new command was given by Jesus specifically to his disciples. They were to love one another with the same love as Jesus'. Secondly, this command does not in any way replace the others. It simply sets the stage for a right attitude in fulfilling the will of God toward fellow believers.

But the way he built his conception about the Old Testament message and covenant hinders him to treat its importance as The Lord Jesus did. Even though Jesus gave this new command, in relation to all the other people he sustained that there are two great commandments. And they order more than love your fellow believer. The first of them says, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." (Mat 22:37) and the second says, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Mat 22:39). Furthermore, Jesus said that "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Mat 22:40). They are the base not the replacement. They set the stage for a right attitude for living and treating God and our neighbors or fellow citizens. And there more neighbors than fellow believers. This is just a small example which can lead believers and Churches astray from the attention they should pay to God's will and commandments. If Andy Stanley is mistaken in such a simple matter, one can only avoid a blind following of his teachings.

On the other hand, the apostle Paul states to Timothy that all the Scripture, and he refers to the Old Testament, "is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). This verse is found in the New Testament, but it refers to all the books of the Old Testament and their content. That should have been enough proof that the Old Testament Scriptures should not be taken easily by any preacher or teacher.

Another way in which Andy Stanley is leading into a misconception stands in another of his statements,

*“The early church moved past the old covenant—why haven’t we? It took the early church more than twenty years to officially disengage from the old covenant. This is entirely understandable. First-century church leaders were Jewish. The old covenant was more than a religious framework. It had been a way of life from childhood. But thanks to the clarity of Paul, the experience of Peter, and the leadership of James, the church eventually abandoned the old for the new Jesus came to inaugurate.”* (Stanley 2019)

In these words, he expresses either a gross intention to make his point or lacks the ability to see that Paul, Peter and James did not lead the Church to abandon the old worship style for the new, nor the application of the Law for the Jewish Christian community. In fact, the disciples used to attend the worship at the Temple in Jerusalem and Paul submits himself to some various Jewish customs. The only “new” was in relation to the gentiles, which were not forced to embrace the fulfilling of the Jewish rites. Stanley misconducts his statement because he omits the development of the Early Church. As the Gospel reached more and more territories the gentiles believers became a majority, while the Jews kept to a steady pace, especially after the defeat of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Andy Stanley is not the first to propose an antithesis between the Law and Grace. Walter C. Kaiser sees Marcion as a first case who did it. Although with a very different theology, yet the outcome heads in the same direction. His teaching was that the Old Testament must be rejected, mainly because he could not see that God of the Old Testament is the same in the New Testament. Yet he used some narratives of the Old Testament to emphasize the difference between the Law and Grace (Kaiser 1991, 19).

Mark Driscoll seems to have untied the knot as he underlines the fact that,

*“Some of the devaluation of the Old Testament may be caused by its very title. The term “old” seems to denote information that is archaic, dated, and irrelevant in comparison to the New Testament. It was the early church father Origen (185–254) who first coined the phrases Old and New Testaments. Prior to this designation, the Jews and early church would have only known what we call the Old Testament as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, or the Scriptures. Origen’s confusion came from misunderstanding Jeremiah’s use of the old and new covenants in Jeremiah 31:31. By “new,” Jeremiah did not mean something detached from the prior works of God, but something renewed or fulfilled. Therefore, the new covenant is the renewal or fulfillment of the old.”* (Driscoll 2008, 16)

Walter C. Kaiser adds to that our modern understanding of the word “new” and isolates the problem. He sees that if we were to understand it in the same way as the prophet Jeremiah, it would start with a renewal not a change, a renewal of the covenant “as can be seen from the use of the same Hebrew word for the ‘new moon’” (Kaiser 1991, 25-26). That would dismantle Andy Stanley’s idea of antagonistic positions and irreconciliation of the old covenant and the new covenant.

Gregory K. Beale comes to help the preachers and teachers by presenting what were the requirements for the contributors to his volume on the New Testament use of the Old Testament (Beale 2007, xxiv-xxv). A couple of them fit with the above observation of Walter C. Kaiser – understanding of the language used by the writers – if it is just a way of speaking because of the spiritual formation background or if they coined new ideas or terms. This was supposed to be applied especially to the New Testament writers and writings.

Some other preachers and teachers tend to give up studying the Word of God because they encounter inaccuracies or self-contradictions and to move in the area where they wait on the Holy Spirit to speak to them, Archer Gleason thinks that they “set in motion a dialectical process of degeneration and spiritual decline that impels them in the direction of increasing skepticism or

eclecticism” (Gleason 1982, 24). Usually, their stop takes place while reading and studying the Old Testament. These can be anybody, lay Christian members or preachers and teachers. One touch for them could be the example of our Lord Jesus. He believed the entire Old Testament as being true and based a lot of his teaching on it. Gleason concludes that “He who refuses to go along with the Lord in this judgment stands guilty of asserting that God can err (since Jesus is God as well as Man) and that the sovereign Creator (John 1:1-3) stands in need of instruction and correction by the finite wisdom of man.” (Gleason 1982, 25).

Dinah Baah-Odoom, and Frimpong Wiafe underline the two ingredients of the Christian faith foundation: the apostles and prophets. The apostles were part of the New Testament, but the prophets were of the Old Testament. Yet overall the teaching that the apostles followed was that of Jesus – who preached his message ‘entirely out of the Old Testament’ (Baah-Odoom, and Wiafe 2016, 2423). This could also set an example for the nowadays preachers and teachers regarding the use of the Old Testament in preaching and teaching.

## Conclusions

The use of the Old Testament Scriptures in today’s teaching and preaching can be a challenge for some Christians. Sometimes it leads one to give up or renounce the validity or importance of using it, as in the case of Marcion and Andy Stanley. But there are numerous cases along in the Romanian churches who are close to the stand of Andy Stanley or something similar. And this is happening in different churches. The lack of Old Testament teaching is seen in their lifestyle emphasize of the grace and love of God. They tend to take some situations easily.

The main problem of the teaching leaders is a danger to the Christian body of believers as it can undermine the authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures. Once the thrust in the Old Testament scriptures is weakened, the next in line is the New Testament. There is a need for Christian teachers and preachers to use the Old Testament to put a solid base for their messages and doctrines. The great importance for the believers and the new converts is to see that everything comes in an orderly fashion from God, that the historical actions have been prophesied or spoken about and that there are life examples for all sort of situations.

Greatness is not the safest ingredient for a clear understanding of the Scriptures as in the case of Marcion, Andy Stanley, and many other Christian leaders. There is a need to humble oneself and do a proper exegetic and hermeneutic study to really be able to serve the Church with sound doctrines. Sometimes the modern meaning of the words can be a stumble in the way of a proper conclusion. Other times the way some terms are coined can lead into the same kind of trap.

Therefore, the best approach is to follow the example of Jesus, our Lord, his disciples, and New Testament writers. That challenges the preachers and the teachers to draw closer to the study and learning of the Old Testament scriptures and how they relate to the New Testament teachings and the Christian life.

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