

“Must We Preach Christ from Every OT Passage? Concerns about Christocentric Hermeneutics”

Intro: Here are just a selection of NT verses that refer to the apostles preaching Christ. The point to the centrality of Christ's life, ministry, and teaching for Scripture and for all believers:

1 Cor. 2:2- “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.”

1 Cor. 15:3-4- “³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,”

Gal 6:14- “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Cf. Acts 17:2-3; 17:18c; Rom. 15:19; 1 Cor. 1:23-24; 15:57

A Christocentric hermeneutic affirms that God expects teachers and preachers to find a clear Christological truth in every passage or we have mishandled that passage.

Two key truths:

I now say that the OT is “**Christotelic.**” The Greek word “telos” means end or goal.

Christ does provide the consummation of His Father's plan for the world.

Here is a second key thought.

In my interpretive method, I am trying to grasp the biblical authors intention in a given passage—“authorial intention.”

To say it another way, “what did the original author intend his original readers to understand from the words that he used?”

His intention in that original setting is an important guide for how we interpret Scripture.

I. What Is Christocentric Hermeneutics

Big Idea: A growing number of scholars and preachers and teachers affirm that the only way to correctly handle an OT passage is to find the divinely intended Christological truth there. If you could not find a Christological truth there, don't waste your time preaching from that passage. Some proponents have said this: If you could preach a sermon at a Jewish synagogue—nothing about Christ—don't bother!!

****On the last two pages, I have provided images from an article by a friend who embraces this hermeneutic to show the way proponents of Christocentric hermeneutics take numerous categories of OT promises and bring them across for direct fulfillment to NT believers.**

A. Key Features

Abner Chou offers several main emphases of Christocentric hermeneutics¹:

1. This approach fundamentally desires to present every text in relation to Christ's person and work.
2. The Christocentric approach stresses the unity of Scripture. Because of this, it is sometimes called a redemptive-historical hermeneutic.
3. The Christocentric approach emphasizes the theology of Scripture. It desires to preach doctrine and theology, a theology of Christ and the gospel.
4. It does stress the need for grammatical-historical interpretation as a foundation for its method rather than allegorical interpretation.
5. At the same time, the Christocentric approach acknowledges the need to move beyond grammatical-historical hermeneutics to a theological method. Typology is an important tool to make their desired connections.

It contrasts itself with a Christotelic approach—Christ is the goal or consummation of Scripture—which abides within a grammatical-historical framework. The Christotelic view upholds the original meaning of a text while acknowledging a text's implications *may* ultimately link with Christ.

This limitation is not enough for the Christocentric method. It contends that Christ is *in every text*!

6. The Christocentric approach emphasizes its *Christian* nature. It is “Christian” because it focuses upon the gospel, and so it is sometimes called gospel-centered preaching.

See Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 76-99; Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 70-92.

Albert Mohler writes this about what he views as a correct approach to preaching:

“Every single text of Scripture points to Jesus Christ. . . . From Moses to the prophets, He is the focus of every single word of the Bible. Every verse of Scripture finds its fulfillment in Him, and every story in the Bible ends with Him.”²

B. Common passages cited in support:

Here are the main passages that are assumed to teach that *every single OT text points to Jesus*:

- Luke 24:25-27- “²⁵ He said to them, “How unwise and slow you are to believe in your hearts all that **the prophets** have spoken! ²⁶ Didn’t *the Messiah* have to suffer these things and enter into His glory?” ²⁷ Then beginning with **Moses and all the Prophets**, He interpreted for them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”
- Luke 24:44-45- ⁴⁴ Then [Jesus] told them, “These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that *everything* written about Me in **the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms** must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.”

¹ Abner T. Chou, “A Hermeneutical Evaluation of the Christocentric Hermeneutic,” *Master's Seminary Journal*, 27, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 115-16.

² R. Albert Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 96.

- John 5:39- “You pore over the *Scriptures* because you think you have eternal life in them, yet they testify about Me.”
- 1 Cor 1:22-23- “²² For the Jews ask for signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.”
- 1 Cor 2:2- “For I didn’t think it was a good idea to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”
- 2 Cor 4:5- “For we are not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves because of Jesus.”

C. Sample Passage Interpretation—1 Samuel 17

***1 Samuel 17—the account of David’s victory over Goliath—is a common example passage used to demonstrate how Christocentric hermeneutics works.

Goldsworthy paints a picture of David standing alone as the one in the place of many, and through him, God works salvation for Israel. He writes David’s victory over Goliath “is a saving event in which the chosen mediator wins the victory, while the ordinary people stand by until they can share in the fruits of the saviour’s victory. Preparation is thus made for the gospel events in which God’s Christ (Anointed One) wins the victory over sin and death on behalf of his people.”³

Peter Leithart writes: “Verse 5 says that the Philistine giant was wearing ‘scale armor,’ and the Hebrew word simply means ‘scales.’ This sort of armor is attested throughout the ancient Near East, but the fact that he is described as wearing ‘scales’ indicates that Goliath was a serpent. Once again there is a serpent in the garden-land of Israel (see 1 Sam. 11). Israel needed not only a Joshua, but a true Adam, a seed of the woman, to crush the serpent’s head.”⁴

He adds that “David was the new Adam that Israel had been waiting for, the beast-master taking dominion over bears and lions and now fighting a ‘serpent’.”⁵

Leithart makes these additional connections:

- Goliath was dressed like a serpent with his scale armor, and he died like a serpent, with a head wound, just as the Philistine god Dagon had his head crushed.
- David acknowledged that He was the true Victor.
- Goliath’s head was sent to Jerusalem, an odd decision since Jebusites still controlled Jerusalem. Perhaps David sent the head to Jerusalem to give the Jebusites a glimpse of their future.
- Goliath’s severed head was sent to the city where one of David’s descendants would many centuries later win a great victory at Golgotha, the place of the skull.⁶

³ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 1981), 86.

⁴ Peter J. Leithart, *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 98.

⁵ Leithart, *A Son to Me*, 99.

⁶ Leithart, *A Son to Me*, 100.

II. Concerns about Christocentric Hermeneutics

A. What about passages that are taken to demand that every passage has a Christological truth?

Because Luke 24 is pivotal, we should note what it tells us about Jesus and the Old Testament:

- Luke 24:25-27- “²⁵ He said to them, “How unwise and slow you are to believe in your hearts all that ***the prophets*** have spoken! ²⁶ Didn’t *the Messiah* have to suffer these things and enter into His glory?” ²⁷ Then beginning with ***Moses and all the Prophets***, He interpreted for them the things concerning Himself in ***all the Scriptures***.”
- Luke 24:44-45- ⁴⁴ Then [Jesus] told them, “These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that *everything* written about Me in ***the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms*** must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand ***the Scriptures***.”

These are slightly revised versions of three helpful points Ralph Davis made about the meaning of Luke 24 in particular. I added a fourth:⁷

- (1) Jesus is concerned with the *totality* of the Old Testament’s witness (v. 25, “*all* that the prophets have spoken”; v. 44- it was necessary for “*all things* written in the law of Moses and in the prophets and in the psalms”), particularly its witness of the *sufferings* of the Messiah prior to his glory (vv. 26, 46).
- (2) there is a wide *scope* of Old Testament materials in which this testimony to Christ can be found—a witness to the Messiah is found in all parts of the Old Testament.
 - v. 25- “the prophets”
 - v. 27a- from “Moses and from all the prophets”
 - v. 27c, 45- “the Scriptures”
 - v. 44b, things written “in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms”
 - **The Psalms is not a reference to a section of the OT but an OT book that carefully develops the message and ministry of the Messiah.
- (3) the witness of the Old Testament Scriptures carries a particular *focus* upon the Messiah himself (v. 27b, “the things concerning himself,” v. 44, “all the things written . . . concerning me”).
- (4) 24:27- “Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted for them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”

What did Jesus do? “He interpreted for them”

What comes first?- “the things concerning Himself”

Where?”- “in all the Scriptures”

Jesus explained those passages that were “concerning Himself.” He does not say that He showed how every Scripture passage referred to Him.

Davis concludes: “the whole Old Testament bears witness to Christ; and, the Old Testament does not bear witness only to Christ.”⁸

⁷ Dale Ralph Davis, *The Word Became Flesh: How to Preach from Old Testament Narrative Texts* (Geanies House, Scotland: Mentor, 2006), 134.

⁸ Davis, *The Word Became Flesh*, 134.

He continues:

“I think Jesus is teaching that *all parts* of the Old Testament testify of the Messiah in his suffering and glory, but I do not think Jesus is saying that *every* Old Testament passage/text bears witness to him. Jesus referred to the things written about him *in* the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms—he did not say that every passage spoke of him (v. 44). Therefore, I do not feel compelled to make every Old Testament (narrative) passage point to Christ in some way because I do not think Christ himself requires it.”⁹

“I am convinced that I do not honor Christ by forcing him into texts where he is not.”¹⁰

Ralph Davis asks these two important questions: The question is not: Should we preach Christ from Old Testament texts? (Answer: Yes); but: *Must* we preach Christ from *every* Old Testament text? (Answer: No).¹¹

B. What is the Correct Way to Interpret 1 Samuel 17?

There are three fundamental truths we should grasp in 1 Samuel 17.

1. God will put His man on the throne of His chosen people.

That is really the key theme of 1 and 2 Samuel.

1 Sam. 15- strike two, you are out, Saul- He failed to obey God’s clear instructions—wipe out the Amalekites—Yahweh has someone else to rule over His covenant nation:

1 Sam 15:22-28:

²² Then Samuel said:

Does the Lord take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams.

²³ For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and defiance is like wickedness and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, **He has rejected you as king.**

^{26b} Because you rejected the word of the Lord, **the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel.**” ²⁷ When Samuel turned to go, Saul grabbed the hem of his robe, and it tore. ²⁸ Samuel said to him, **“The Lord has torn the kingship of Israel away from you today and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you.”**

1 Samuel 16- Where does Yahweh tell Samuel to go, and what must he do?

****Anoint God’s choice for king over Israel—David!**

1 Samuel 17- Who looks like God’s choice for king of Israel? David.

Yahweh is bringing His plan for Israel to pass—from Judah, through Ruth, Obed, and Jesse

⁹ Davis, *The Word Became Fresh*, 135.

¹⁰ Davis, *The Word Became Fresh*, 138.

¹¹ Davis, *The Word Became Fresh*, 134.

God moves his plan forward toward the One who will be the perfect King over God's worldwide Kingdom and over His covenant people.

2. Yahweh expects His followers to have a theocentric focus.

1 Samuel 33:33-47:

³³ But Saul replied, "You can't go fight this Philistine. You're just a youth, and he's been a warrior since he was young." ³⁴ David answered Saul: "Your servant has been tending his father's sheep. Whenever a lion or a bear came and carried off a lamb from the flock, ³⁵ I went after it, struck it down, and rescued the lamb from its mouth. If it reared up against me, I would grab it by its fur, strike it down, and kill it. ³⁶ Your servant has killed lions and bears; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, **for he has defied the armies of the living God.**" ³⁷ Then David said, **"The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine."**

Saul said to David, "Go, and may the Lord be with you." [Be warmed and filled!!]

³⁸ Then Saul had his own military clothes put on David. He put a bronze helmet on David's head and had him put on armor. ³⁹ David strapped his sword on over the military clothes and tried to walk, but he was not used to them. "I can't walk in these," David said to Saul, "I'm not used to them." So David took them off. ⁴⁰ Instead, he took his staff in his hand and chose five smooth stones from the wadi and put them in the pouch, in his shepherd's bag. Then, with his sling in his hand, he approached the Philistine.

⁴¹ The Philistine came closer and closer to David, with the shield-bearer in front of him. ⁴² When the Philistine looked and saw David, he despised him because he was just a youth, healthy and handsome. ⁴³ He said to David, "Am I a dog that you come against me with sticks?" Then he cursed David by his gods. ⁴⁴ "Come here," the Philistine called to David, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts!"

⁴⁵ David said to the Philistine: "You come against me with a dagger, spear, and sword, **but I come against you in the name of Yahweh of Hosts, the God of Israel's armies—you have defied Him.** ⁴⁶ **Today, the Lord will hand you over to me.** Today, I'll strike you down, cut your head off, and give the corpses of the Philistine camp to the birds of the sky and the creatures of the earth. **Then all the world will know that Israel has a God,** ⁴⁷ and this whole assembly will know that it is not by sword or by spear that the Lord saves, **for the battle is the Lord's. He will hand you over to us."**

3. Yahweh demands that His followers TRUST Him to be and do what He promised to be and do!!

Words for "trust" never occur in this passage, but the disposition of trust/dependence is obvious throughout the passage.

C. Is there any appropriate way to connect an event like the David and Goliath account with God's larger plan for His created world?

1. Jesus is the crescendo or culmination of God's plan for His created world.
2. There are possible allusions or links between select concepts found in OT and NT passages.
3. However, we need to practice exegesis and exposition that treat the passage in light of its context and content for primary understanding.

For 1 Samuel 17 in particular, as great and important as the truth of Christ dying on the Cross for our sins is, *that understanding* of 1 Samuel 17 is *not the key point* (according to good, contextually-driven interpretation) *of that passage*.

The result of Christocentric hermeneutics is that key teachings on Theology Proper, Pneumatology, Anthropology (and other doctrines), and key OT concepts (Mosaic Law, biblical covenants, history of ancient Israel, etc.) are overlooked or minimized in numerous OT passages.

4. The OT repeatedly and intentionally provides for a growing understanding of the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ. Various predictions and foundational statements pave the way for OT readers as well as readers today. Jesus the Messiah *DOES PROVIDE* the culmination/crescendo of God's program for His creation.

We should spend time in various settings helping our people see that God has a plan and brings that plan to pass in a way that matches numerous biblical statements.

III. Any Suggestions for Preaching Christ from OT passages?

- A. Always avoid typology unless clearly specified in Scripture.
“Intertextuality” involves a much longer conversation. However, there are links at the concept or word level that connect one passage with others.
- B. Give Full Attention to the Context and Content of the OT Passages You Are Preaching or Teaching.
- C. With Key Passages That Have Christological Implications (Gen 22, 47, Num 24, certain Psalms, etc.), Develop Those Implications as Part of Your Explanation of the Message of the Passage.
- D. Periodically (e.g., Advent season), Deal with Passages that Pave the Way for Our Understanding of the OT Preparation for the Coming of the Messiah.
- E. Conclude Sermons with a Call to Salvation through Christ and the Gospel.

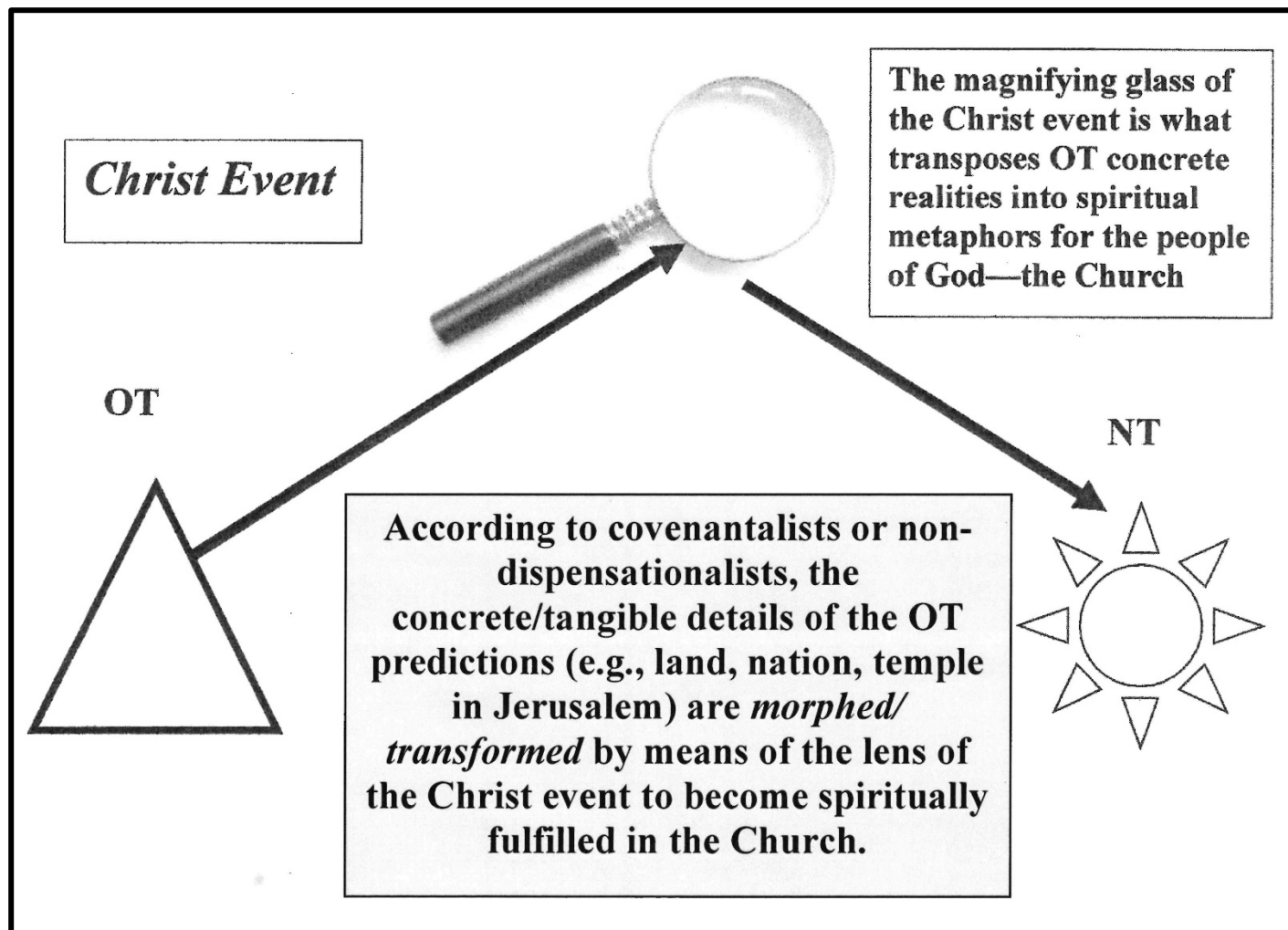
IV. How Does This Method Relate to the Eschatology of the Proponents of Christocentric Hermeneutics?

Appendix #1: Proposed Hermeneutical Justification for the Transformation of OT Prophecies (by Non-Dispensationalists and Covenant Theologians)

The point of the below image is to graphically demonstrate the transformation in meaning proposed by those who favor a Christocentric hermeneutic.

For them, the Christ Event is the “cause” or justification for the transposing literal realities of the OT into spiritual, typological, or metaphorical realities in the NT. The different shapes in the below image are meant to highlight that transposition of meaning.

Besides being a mishandling of OT passages, Christocentric hermeneutics also serves as the interpretive cause for rejecting a future or literal fulfillment of concrete realities presented in the OT: land, nation, Temple, etc.



Conclusion: Are we able to preach about Christ from the OT?

Yes, numerous OT passages tell us several truths about Christ.

Must we preach Christ in every OT passage? No, not unless the context and content of the passage presents those truths.

Luke 24:44 is not the “Great Commission” for Christocentric preaching.

It does affirm that Christ, through his first and second coming, ruling over the earth during the millennium, and in every way brings to fulfillment God’s intentions for the world.

That makes Christ the consummation of God’s plan for the world.

We can at least say that the OT (and the Bible) is “Christotelic.”

Bibliography

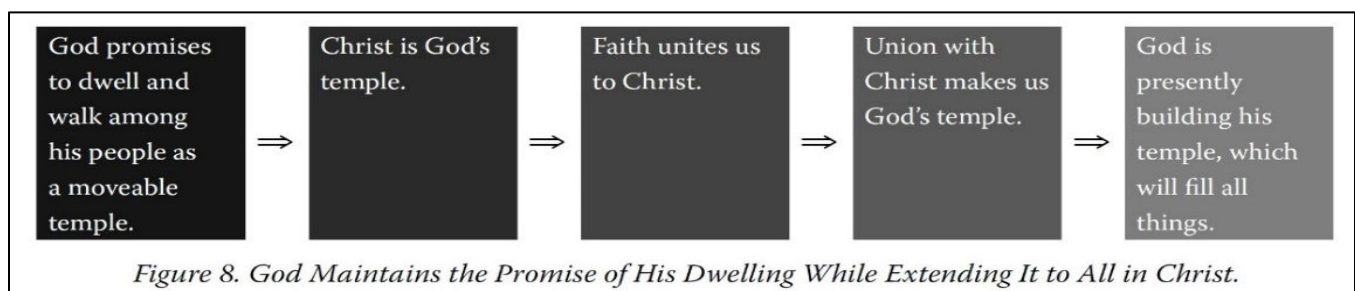
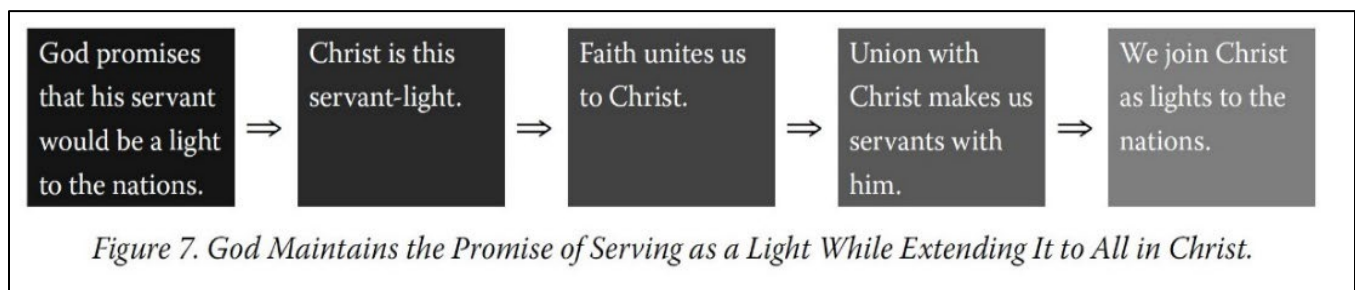
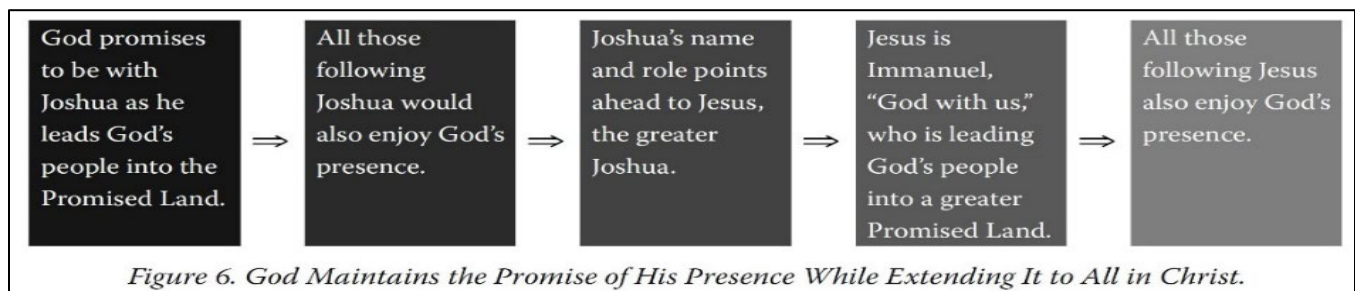
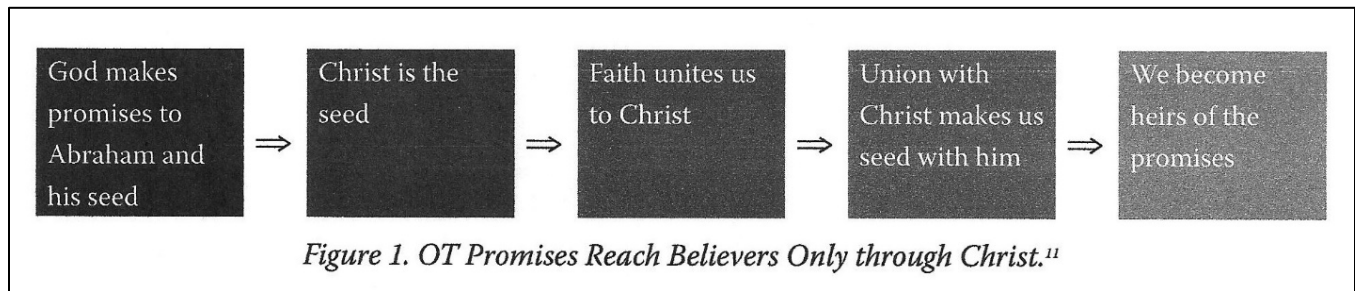
Block, Daniel I. “Christotelic Preaching: A Plea for Hermeneutical Integrity and Missional Passion.” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 7-34.

- _____. "Daniel Block on Christ-Centered Hermeneutics." In *Christ-Centered Preaching and Teaching*, ed. Ed Stetzer, 5-8. Nashville: Lifeway, 2013.
- Chou, Abner T. "A Hermeneutical Evaluation of the Christocentric Hermeneutic." *Master's Seminary Journal*, 27, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 113-139.
- _____. "Real Thick Meaning and Preaching Christ from the Old Testament." *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 143-55.
- Davis, Dale Ralph. *The Word Became Fresh: How to Preach from Old Testament Narrative Texts*. Geanies House, Scotland: Mentor, 2006.
- Goldsworthy, Graeme. *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012.
- _____. *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament*. Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 1981.
- Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. "Walt Kaiser on Christ-Centered Hermeneutics." In *Christ-Centered Preaching and Teaching*, ed. Ed Stetzer, 14-17. Nashville: Lifeway, 2013.
- Keller, Timothy *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Viking, 2015.
- Kuruvilla, Abraham. "David V. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with What He Is Saying." *JETS* 58, no. 3 (Sept. 2015): 487-506.
- Leithart, Peter J. *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.
- Mohler, R. Albert, Jr. *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World*. Chicago: Moody, 2008.

Appendix #2: Ways a Scholar Explains Connecting OT Truths to NT Believers via a Christocentric Understanding

***The images on the next page are taken from Jason S. DeRouchie, “Is Every Promise “Yes”? Old Testament Promises and the Christian,” *Themelios* 42, no. 1 (April 2017): 34, 38, 39, and 42. He would agree with a basically “Christocentric” approach to interpreting and preaching OT passages.

I provide these images so you can see the way proponents of Christocentric hermeneutics take numerous categories of OT promises and bring them across for direct fulfillment to NT believers.



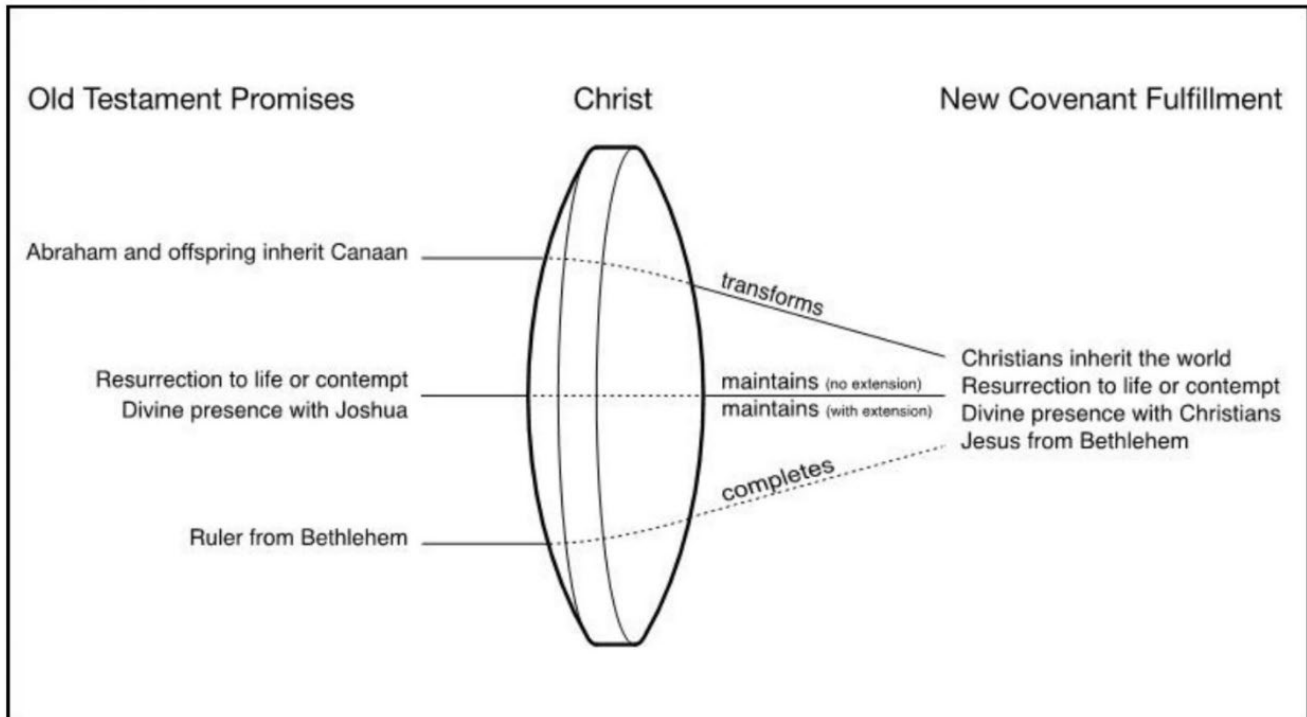
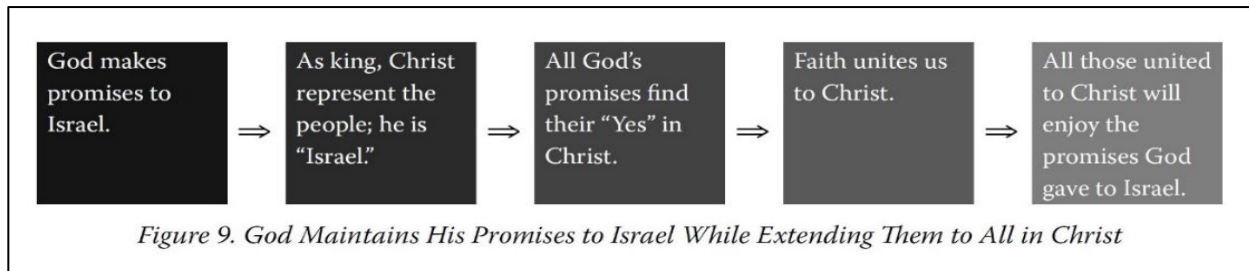


Figure 5. The Fulfillment of OT Promises through the "Lens" of Christ