



The Old Testament and Christian life

Recently a debate was held in our congregation defending the thesis that you need only the New Testament to know how to live a Christian life. I maintain that you do actually need the Old Testament and would like to specify that further in this article. What sections of Christian life would you miss were you to keep the Old Testament closed?

It is not surprising that people today underestimate the importance of the Old Testament. More and more Christians are experiencing a contradiction between the Old and the New Testament. The Old was for Israel; the New is for the church. In addition, there is an increasingly allergic reaction to the commandments. It is then said that Christians do not have to deal with Moses' commandments but with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, or only with the commandment of love. God no longer tells us what is right and wrong but renews us through Christ's Spirit. Good works will then follow naturally and may vary according to the situation. This opinion often stems from an evangelical background, although many evangelical Christians are placing different accents today. For Reformed Christians, however, this is quite an about-turn. Ever since Calvin they had been reproached for being far too Old Testamentary. That we sang only psalms in the church services was no coincidence. Nevertheless, I dare to question whether the Reformed truly did that much with the Old Testament in their ethical practice. Firstly, we often limited ourselves to the commandments in the Old Testament. By preference we divided those into three categories. The ceremonial prescriptions accompanying Israel's worship services we would rule out, they were not for us. The same was valid for civil laws given to Israel to form their existence as a nation. In the end, we were left with only the moral commandments, words containing God's will for all times and places. Those too we also usually summarize in the Ten Commandments. In this way, in the practice of daily Christian life, the greater part of the Old Testament remains out of view for Reformed Christians as well.

Development

Actually, it is right to build a Christian life praxis on the New Testament first of all. In Matt. 28 Jesus ordered his disciples to obey everything *He had commanded*, bearing in mind the Sermon on the Mount. This forms the constitution of the Kingdom and therefore forms the basis for Christian life. It is also correct to emphasize before all else that Christian life revolves around unity with Jesus and following Him. He makes new people of us, people who learn to think and feel like Him. For this reason the sermon starts with the beatitudes which sketch the contours of a Christian character as opposed to listing a pile of duties. Paul's words in Galatians 5 about the fruits of the Spirit are also directed at more than simply our behaviour. They regard new qualities. All that being said, it does not mean that the practical content of this new Christian life cannot be made specific. Jesus and his apostles also specified very clearly what did and did not belong in this new existence. In doing so, they continually fall back on The Old Testament, developing the Christian way of life from that starting point. In the Sermon on the Mount for example, Jesus presents concrete directions for a Christian life. He derives these constantly from the Old Testament. In this way, for example, he launches his radical words on adultery by making use of the seventh commandment. His instructions for a Christian life originate by placing Old Testament words in the perspective of the coming Kingdom of God. At the same time, Jesus leaves many terrains of life undiscussed. He brings up adultery and dealing with one's enemies, but not the Sabbath or the relationship between parents and children. Is he demanding concrete choices from us concerning sexual ethics, while the rest remains unspecified and is left to grow spontaneously? We misunderstand the Sermon on the Mount if we think that. He is challenging us as mature Christians to do the same with these other themes as he had demonstrated in the Sermon on the Mount. The content of a Christian lifestyle can be found by working 'New Testamentally' with the Old Testament words.

Mix

Do not the apostles do this constantly in their letters? Paul's instructions for a Christian life in Romans 12-15, for example, form an educational mix of all the factors with which one could give substance to a Christian way of life. He writes about dedication to God, unity with Jesus, and the creativity of God's Spirit. He repeats direct instructions from Jesus' teaching, such as loving one's enemies. Yet he also brings the Ten Commandments to bear. Alongside that, he draws from other Old Testament passages too concerning the relationship between Israel and other nations, or about people in governmental power. Not that the apostles act as if nothing has changed during time. We do not see a dumb repetition of the Old Testament, but they do generously draw from it. No wonder, as that Old Testament was their only Bible. It is this 'scripture' that is called useful for *teaching righteousness* so that *God's servants may be equipped for every good work* (2 Tim. 3:16).

God, nation, land

Using the Old Testament in this manner is fitting with its content. The biblical scholar Christopher Wright discovered in the Old Testament a triangular relationship between God, the people of Israel, and the promised land of Canaan. Everything God says and does is connected to that triangle. All the laws and instructions show who God is, in building up the people of Israel and bringing them to the Promised Land. The Old Testament displays how the living God, through redemption, creates a new society on a piece of liberated earth, thus presenting a model for all of creation. Israel displayed his kingly priesthood amidst the other nations: from them one could read who God is and what He wants (Ex.19). This new society, based on God's instructions, was meant to attract the attention of other people and bring them to praise their creator. Something of that became visible when the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon (1 Kings 10:9). In this way, the new society or civilization of Israel was formed, in the triangular relationship between God, people, and land, an intermediate station on the road to God's ultimate destination, the re-creation. Stopping at this intermediate station, we see that God remains faithful to his creation, redeems her and brings her to his destination. That being said, we must not make such an intermediate station absolute. On many points we are still at the beginning. Often Moses' commandments show us what changed in respect to other nations when Israel started serving the true God. God does not lift his people suddenly up and out of the world of those other people. He does not suddenly make them perfect. Israel's new society formed a kind of experimental field, with God's worldwide goal at the same time still far away. Nevertheless, we cannot just skip past that intermediate station. God's instructions for Israel are not random or meaningless but all have something to do with God's course from creation to kingdom. They say something about who God is, what the new civilization revolving around him looks like and what he has in mind for this earth. We need them in order to develop a suitable Christian way of life further along the track today.

Changed triangle

What we should bear in mind, however, is that the three corners of the triangle have now changed. We have a deeper knowledge of God, thanks to Jesus. We no longer form a nation united on earth but a community that is scattered across the world. And we do not yet have our own liberated land but are pilgrims on our way to the new world of the future. This must be thought through when trying to discover God's will from the Old Testament.

In doing so, however, we may not limit ourselves to moral prescriptions alone or direct ourselves only to the Ten Commandments. The whole Old Testament explains how God shaped the society around Him in the Promised Land. So, in principle, everything helps in finding conclusions for today. Of course, the manner in which passages from the Old Testament can be applied to life today is not always completely clear. In this we recognize Christian maturity, which demands that we, as followers of Christ, draw expectantly from the Old Testament for our Christian life.

Society and justice

I would like to illustrate this with a few examples. Only the Old Testament can help us with a Christian view on how to treat the earth or on the government and organization of a society. In the New Testament these were not a topical questions as Christians had hardly any influence in the world they

lived in. Their orientation shifts from the Promised Land to the new heavens and the new earth. Therefore they do not reflect upon their position in a foreign society but barely enter into the question of how such a society should be organized or governed. Later on, Christians did receive the opportunity to exert influence in society. Then they immediately fell back on the Old Testament because it contains instructions that let how God sees society shimmer through. Today we see something comparable concerning the environmental issue. The New Testament offers us no more than a basic attitude, but thanks to the Old Testament we discover that God saw animals as valuable creations and that we should not degrade the land. With regard to possessions and the economy, the New Testament teaches that Christians as pilgrims on route should consider possessions as something relative and be prepared to make sacrifices. While one will not find reflections about the best economic structure, it is becoming an increasingly important issue for Christians. In the modern world we too form little cogs in the mighty economic system. The Old Testament in particular contains many directions for the economy, for example the instructions for the year of jubilee, in which slaves were to be released and all debts forgiven. A Christian politician recently proved just how topical that is by rightly referring to this rule in connection with Greece's unsolvable burden of debt.

In short, one could say: without the Old Testament the whole Christian social tradition of thought and Christian reflection on political responsibility and justice would never have developed. The same is true, for example, of the Christian view on violence, punishment and on war and peace. Of old, such 'earthly' applications of Gods words were characteristic of Reformed Christians, and not evangelical Christians. That had everything to do with the evaluation of the 'earthly' Old Testament.

Wisdom and relativism

Another point of value for Christian life is the commonsense wisdom in the Old Testament. Especially books such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes make it clear that, in order to discern between good and evil, it is necessary that you simply open your eyes and look around you at everyday reality. You must not think that you can derive everything directly from the Bible. If you look around you, in unity with Christ and through the spectacles of God's words, you will see much to help you make practical choices between good and evil. Christian life revolves for a great part around practical wisdom in a realistically viewed world. Jesus' New Testament message is profound and radical. Yet it is not meant as an abstract ideal, but something to start working with, concretely and practically. Sometimes we must start in a small way and can only take small steps ahead, and sometimes we are not able to keep evil at bay for quite a while. The Old Testament then helps us to find the most responsible route in imperfect situations. This brings to mind the manner in which Moses temporarily condones divorce, while limiting it at the same time.

Feast and Advent

My final example concerns the festival calendar for God's Old Testament society. Apparently, God wants people to celebrate his works together in such a way that they fit into the rhythm of the seasons in the Promised Land. On these feasts everyone was allowed to share in God's blessing, especially the weak and the foreigners. If I stand for a moment at that intermediate station and try to process it for today's times, I will not claim that such feasts were only ceremonial prescriptions to which Christians are no longer bound. It brings me a taste of God's intentions for humanity and the earth. Does not Revelation 7 depict Gods kingdom as an eternal Feast of Tabernacles?

Therefore it suits the Christian lifestyle to independently shape it into something new for today. Isn't it wonderful that the early Church instigated a Sunday and Christian feast days? God's new works in Christ were celebrated and connected to the rhythm of a suffering creation and with love for the weak and for other people. We can only think of this if we are used to drawing from the Old Testament for the organization of Christian life. Thanks only to the Old Testament is it now Advent again.

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