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All of a Piece

Is the Old Testament irrelevant?

BY DONALD E. BURKE

What are Christians to do with the Old Testament? Frequently, we struggle to answer this question. The Old Testament, after all, is often difficult to understand. For many, God in the Old Testament seems unpredictable, filled with wrath and prone to judgment and destruction. In addition, a commonly stated view is that the Old Testament is dominated by “law” and the New Testament is dominated by “grace”—and who wouldn’t prefer grace over law?

For some, the only redeeming value to be found in the Old Testament is that it points forward to Jesus Christ; and since we have the New Testament from which to learn about Jesus, surely we can dispense with the Old Testament. Finally, the simple designation of the first part of the Christian Bible as the *Old* Testament suggests that it has been superseded by the *new* and improved *New* Testament. Perhaps it is time to “unhitch” Christianity from the Old Testament.

Before we rip the Old Testament out of the Bible, it is important to observe that none of these concerns about the place of the Old Testament in the Christian Scriptures is new. They have a long history that stretches back to the second-century Christian thinker Marcion, who argued in favour of the abandonment of the Old Testament (and several of the writings of the New Testament as well). Many of Marcion’s arguments against the Old Testament were the same as those advanced today—he asserted that the Old Testament is dominated by law and that the New Testament is characterized by grace. Basically, Marcion argued that the New Testament has made the Old Testament irrelevant.

The church did not follow Marcion’s lead. Eventually, his views were judged heretical and he was excommunicated. But far from having been put to rest, Marcion’s views continue to find new life as they resurface in each generation. While some Christians might in effect remove the Old Testament from

their Bibles by ignoring it, others want to exclude it entirely from the Scriptures. However, it is my conviction that to do so would be a devastating error.

So, what is it that keeps Christians tied to the Old Testament? Why does it really matter? In this article, I will respond to two broad assertions that are commonly made about the Old Testament to support removing it from the Bible. In a second article, I will discuss some of the positive contributions that the Old Testament makes to Christian faith.

Claim #1: The Old Testament has been made irrelevant by the New Testament.

As Christians, we believe that in Jesus Christ, God has been revealed definitively. It is in Jesus that we learn most clearly the character of God. In Jesus’ devotion to his neighbours and his self-sacrificing love, we also receive the fullest revelation of God’s love for all of creation.

Yet while this is all true, it should not lead us to think that the Old Testament

is unnecessary. The Old Testament is indispensable as a witness to the one God who showed divine love and concern for the Hebrew slaves in Egypt; for the weak and powerless in Israel at the time of the prophets; for the refugees and displaced persons in Israel who could be subject to abuse and harm; and who was revealed in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament reminds us that the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ did not suddenly wake up to the plight of humanity and decide to intervene on our behalf. Rather, the Old Testament teaches us that God's sending of his Son was the climax of a long history of God's self-giving love that has continually sought to draw rebellious humanity home to God. Without the Old Testament, our understanding of God's mission in the world and even of God's character would be incomplete.

For Christians, neither testament can stand on its own. Neither testament, on its own, represents the full counsel of God for the church. It is only when they are heard together that we receive "the divine rule of Christian faith and practice," as it says in The Salvation Army's first doctrine.

Claim #2: The Old Testament is dominated by "law" and the New Testament is filled with "grace."

This is a common caricature that results from a selective reading of both testaments. Yes, law has a prominent place in the Old Testament. But we need to broaden our understanding of "law" to realize that law is more than a set of arbitrary rules that must be obeyed. The Hebrew term *torah*, most often translated into English as "law," should more properly be translated as "instruction." *Torah* is a means of guidance for the people of God that helps to shape our values, our behaviour and our character in ways that will facilitate the creation of a faithful human community. For Israel, this instruction was necessary since they were called out of slavery in Egypt to become a community of contrast—a community with different values, that operates on different principles—when set alongside its neighbours. They needed to learn a new way of life. In this situa-

tion, *torah* has a positive, instructive and community-shaping function.

This broadened understanding of law as instruction can also be applied to the New Testament. There we find Jesus giving instruction to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5-7) and Paul giving instructions to his churches in many of his letters. Are these "laws" in the sense that they are clear commands? Sometimes they are; at other times, they are more akin to guidance. They provide signposts that guide us

toward lives that are consistent with our new life in Christ. In this sense, there is continuity between the two testaments: both provide instruction about how to live in harmony with God's intentions for the world.

Of course, there is the flipside of this claim, which suggests that the Old Testament knows nothing of the grace of God. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Old Testament speaks again and again of God's relentless grace extended to people in a variety of circumstances. From the very beginning of the biblical story, we find that God provided disobedient Adam and Eve with clothes (see Genesis 3:21), that God put a mark on murderous Cain to protect him from violence (see Genesis 4:15) and that God saved Noah and his family from the flood (see Genesis 6-8). And after the flood story, it is God who makes an unconditional commitment to work with a fallen world rather than destroy it again (see Genesis 8:21-22). These all are acts of divine grace.

But the list goes on. It was out of divine grace that God heard the cries of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and delivered them from their genocidal, oppressive rulers (see Exodus 2:23-25). It was grace that motivated God to make a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai (see Exodus

19:4; 20:2). It was divine grace that spared David's life after he had sinned by taking Bathsheba in an adulterous affair and arranging for the death of her husband (see 2 Samuel 12:13). It was God's grace that welled up in the Book of Hosea where, in spite of having built a compelling case for the destruction of Israel for its sinful abandonment of the Lord, we read about the pain that stirred God's compassion and led God to recoil from striking a fatal blow (see Hosea 11:1-9). In the Book of Jeremiah, in the face of a

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brutal and divinely sanctioned destruction of the tiny kingdom of Judah, by the massive Babylonian military machine—caused by Judah's continued breaking of the covenant—Jeremiah pronounced God's intention to reach out again with a new covenant, to heal and restore them once again (see Jeremiah 31:31-34).

God's compassion and grace fill the pages of the Old Testament. Only a selective and distorted reading could say otherwise.

Each of the objections raised against the Old Testament—both in the early church and in our time—can be countered by embracing the full witness of the Old Testament rather than by cherry-picking passages we find troubling. When we read Scripture in its complete form—with both the Old and the New Testament received as the Word of God—we open ourselves up to the full counsel of God for Christian faith and practice. When we neglect or excise the Old Testament, we are left with a fragmentary witness to God's work in the world. That would not only be unfortunate, it would be fatal to the church's mission and witness in the world. ☺

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