IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT JESUS

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Category: Observations

Over the last few years, I've noted a trend in the way that people in my circles talk about the Old Testament. Increasingly, the focus in teaching and writing on the OT is exclusively focussed on the way in which it points to Jesus, rather than looking at the text on its own merits. For example, the Old Testament laws set a standard that we know we can't live up to, thus pointing out the futility of trying to obey the law and showing our need for a saviour.

Let me hurriedly point out that this is a perfectly good and, indeed, necessary way to approach the Old Testament. Jesus tell us that the law and prophets find their fulfilment in him and Paul says that the law is a teacher that leads us to Jesus. When we read the Old Testament, we must have this messianic horizon in mind; it is all about Jesus. However, I don't think that we should stop there. The Old Testament texts have value in their own right as statements of morals and ethics and we need to take them seriously in this way, too. I'd like to briefly highlight two reasons why we need to pay more attention to the Old Testament on its own terms.

The Public Sphere: Western evangelicalism is a highly individualised form of Christianity. Our focus is on ourselves and "our own personal saviour". Even when we get involved with issues of public morality, we tend to do so in areas related to the individual: issues concerning sex and sexuality being at the top of the list. This individualism is not helped by the way that the English language fails to clarify the plural nature of many of the commands and exhortations in the New Testament - we read them as applying to individuals. However, it is in the Old Testament, particularly in the law and prophets that this individualism is challenged. They sketch for us an outline of the sort of society that God sees as being necessary for human flourishing and *shalom.* Justice, using honest measures in trade, welcoming strangers and outcast and caring for the vulnerable are all laid out for us as things that we should aim for and aspire to. This is not an argument for a theocracy - a religious state, but it is an argument for the church to engage at a broader level that transcends issues of individual morality.

Whole Bible Mission: I find it strange that Christians who would generally avoid "proof texts" as a way to demonstrate a doctrine or practice will often reduce the concept of mission to a few verses from the end of the Gospels. Western society has bought into a concept in which the physical and spiritual worlds are completely separate with no obvious point of contact between them. This is reflected in Christian circles by the way in which a distinction is drawn by many people between spiritual mission (preaching) and social action. We are often told that we should concentrate on the former, because other people will do the latter. This is approach is given credence by focussing on the "great commission" passages in the Gospels. However, when we look at the New Testament in its entirety and especially when we start to get to grips with the Old Testament, we see that God's people are called to serve and to advocate as well as to preach the Good News. Indeed, the whole

modern concept of the separation of the physical and spiritual realms is one which the Bible just does not recognise: our philosophical frameworks need to be converted.

Please don't get me wrong; I'm not arguing that we should abandon a messianic reading of the Old Testament, nor am I arguing that mission should be all social action and no proclamation. It is too easy to get sucked into false binaries and to think that doing one thing means rejecting the other. We can read the OT as both pointing to Jesus and as an ethical guide; the one does not have to negate the other.