

Beyond Bible Study: Finding Jesus Christ in Scripture

by Frank Viola

In my personal judgment, many segments of the Christian world today—including much of the emerging church conversation and the house church movement—have lost the centrality of Jesus Christ.

In addition, for many Christians, the Old Testament has fallen out of functional use. Scores of present-day believers do not find anything of spiritual value in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy.

The exception would be the legalists who wish to put everyone under the Law, the Theonomists who wish to turn society into a Christian state, and the apologists who wish to prove that the Old Testament is historically accurate.

But for the rest of God's people, the Old Testament has by and large lost its functional use.

I believe one reason for this is because of the way we have been conditioned to read and interpret the Old Testament, let alone the New Testament.

The Historical Roots of the Modern Hermeneutic

A lot of what passes for biblical interpretation today is simply looking at a biblical text strictly in terms of its intended meaning at the time it was written.

This approach owes much to the 19th-century German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher sought to reconcile the criticisms of the Enlightenment with traditional Protestant orthodoxy. As a result, he was very influential in the evolution of modern Biblical interpretation, including higher criticism.

Since Schleiermacher, a shift has taken place among biblical scholars wherein the common way to study the Bible is to analyze it just like any other written document. This approach sees biblical hermeneutics as a secular science that's applied equally to all writings—secular as well as spiritual.

Consequently, according to the modern method, the Bible is interpreted according to the same rules of interpretation that would apply to the writings of Homer, Tacitus, Aristotle and every other historical document.

This approach to biblical interpretation, though not wrong, is built on modern thinking. Therefore, it has great limitations.

Unfortunately, those Christians who apply pre-modern methods of interpreting Scripture are in jeopardy of having their wrists slapped by advocates of modern biblical hermeneutics.

I submit that the modern way of interpreting Scripture is helpful, but it's not adequate. It's helpful to interpret a biblical text in light of the author's original intent in writing it. It's helpful to understand the sociological and historical context and setting of the people to whom the Bible was written. It's helpful to learn the original language of the biblical authors.

However, a truly biblical hermeneutic cannot be limited to recovering the meaning that was in the author's mind nor in grasping the social, historical, and linguistic setting of the text.

There are three reasons for this:

First, the Holy Spirit often had an intent in Scripture that went beyond the author's knowledge. Andrea Fernandez coined the term *sensus plenior* or "the fuller sense" to describe this fact. The *sensus plenior* refers to "the deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, that is seen to exist in the words of Scripture when they are studied in the light of further revelation."

For instance, the writers of the Old Testament frequently didn't realize that they were speaking about Jesus Christ when they penned Scripture. Examples of this abound throughout the Bible. Here are two in particular.

Hosea 11:1 says, "*When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.*"

Undoubtedly, Hosea believed that he was writing about the nation of Israel in this text. Matthew, however, interpreted this passage to have a meaning that related to Jesus Christ.

Matthew 2:13-15 says, "*When they [Mary and Joseph] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.' So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'*"

In Acts Chapter 2, Peter quotes Psalm 16 and puts the words of David in the mouth of Jesus Christ.

Later, when Peter writes his first epistle, he says that the prophets of old prophesied of the coming Messiah without fully realizing the specifics of what they were prophesying about. He goes on to say that the full meaning of their words was intended for us who live in the New Testament era rather than for those who lived in the Old (1 Peter 1:10-12).

Again, the authors of the Old Testament often did not realize that they were speaking about Jesus Christ when they wrote Scripture.

So understanding the author's intent is certainly part of the task of biblical interpretation, but it's not the whole task.

The second reason why the modern method of biblical interpretation falls short is because the Bible is a supernatural book. It's God-breathed. Consequently, it's a living document.

When we interpret Scripture, therefore, we are not simply interpreting documents as dead objects, like we would analyze tree stumps. We are engaged in a transaction with a Divine book that was authored by a Divine Person who still lives and speaks. Interpreting Scripture, then, is not simply a scientific, secular endeavor. It requires spiritual insight. Paul describes this principle in 1 Corinthians Chapter 2 where he argues that the natural man cannot comprehend the things of the Spirit.

The third reason is that the Scriptures are not a set of disjointed, independent, inspired books. They are a canon. And the books of the canon work together.

Modern methods of biblical interpretation often fail to take into consideration that the biblical text functions authoritatively for the church only as part of a canon. And therefore its meaning is not just the meaning that a particular biblical book has on its own. It's the meaning it has within the canon. And the canon is centered on and ordered around a single theme. The Old Testament and the New Testament are Act 1 and Act 2 of a single drama.

Thus each book must be understood and interpreted within the framework of the greater whole.

On the heels of these three reasons, I believe that the modern method of biblical interpretation is inadequate to fulfill the overarching purpose of Scripture—which is spiritual transformation and conformity to Jesus Christ.

Toward a Christological Hermeneutic

The Scriptures do not exist for mere study or intellectual absorption. They are meant to renew our minds, touch our hearts, and shape our lives. Put another way, the Scriptures are meant to be performed. The Psalms, for example, are meant to be prayed and sung. The

biblical narratives are meant to be meditated upon and responded to. The revelation in the epistles is meant to be embraced and applied.

The vast richness of Scripture can be likened unto an elaborate musical piece that's written out on a sheet of music. That sheet is meant to be interpreted and then performed.

For this reason, the Bible, like a Divine musical composition, requires the contributions of various musicians to interpret and perform it in harmony with one another.

Each musician may use a different approach to interpreting it. And each may perform it in a slightly different way. But taken together, those musicians comprise an orchestra that creates a beautiful melody, expressing the richness of the biblical message through different sounds, pitches, and tones.

Consequently, amid all the methods of biblical interpretation that exist today, there is one method that cannot be overlooked. Without it, the full meaning of the biblical text can never be grasped. The reason is because this method is centered on the main theme of Scripture. It's rooted in the grand narrative that links all of the books of the biblical canon together.

This method is what I call the Christological hermeneutic. The Christological hermeneutic is very simple. Its goal is to find Jesus Christ in all of Scripture.

The Christological hermeneutic is built on the fact that all Scripture has but one center of gravity that links all of it together. And that center of gravity is the Person of Jesus Christ.

This hermeneutic is also built on the notion that the main purpose of Scripture is to present, reveal, disclose, unveil, magnify, glorify, and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ.

Consider this comparison. When an unbelieving Jew looks at the Torah (also called the Pentateuch), he looks at the whole Tanakh, which is what we call the Old Testament. But he sees it as a completely different book than we Christians do.

Why? Because for the Jew, the key to understanding the Torah is to understand the destiny and calling of the nation of Israel.

For us Christians, however, the key is in understanding the destiny and calling of Jesus Christ.

So a Jew and a Christian will find different messages in the same text of Scripture.

For us Christians, the Old Testament isn't just a Jewish book that's the preface to a Christian book. It's one canon, and it's one canon centered on and ordered around Jesus Christ. And we understand the whole canon that way.

Both Old and New Testaments are fused together to create a single book with one coherent message. And that message is Jesus Christ. He is the glue that binds both Testaments together.

I shall paraphrase one writer who says, *The nature of Divine revelation is Christocentric. The mind of God is eternally centered in Christ. All angelic thought and ministry are centered in Christ. All satanic hatred and subtlety are centered against Christ. All human hopes are, and human occupations should be, centered in Christ. The whole material universe in creation is centered in Christ. The entire ministry of the Holy Spirit is to reveal and glorify Christ. For these reasons, the entire written Word, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit, is centered in Christ.*

Jesus Himself taught His disciples the Christological hermeneutic. During His earthly ministry, He made plain that He was the subject and full meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures. In John 5:39, He said to the Jews, *You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures testify of me!* And in verse 46, He said, *Moses wrote about me.*

A Christian hermeneutic is a Christological hermeneutic. Jesus Christ is *the* subject of *all* Scripture. That particular discovery changed my life and radically altered how I read the Bible.

For many years as a Christian, the full meaning of Scripture was veiled to me. The experience was not dissimilar to how Paul described those unbelieving Jews who read the Old Testament:

But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. 2 Corinthians 3:14-16

Later, I began to see the Scriptures in a new light. I saw them not as a destination, but as a guide. I began to view the Scriptures as a road map whose goal was to lead me to a greater knowledge and experience of this incredible Christ . . . the despised Galilean, my Lord and Savior.

The Old Testament became God's picture book for me and for the believing community in which I was a part. Together we began to understand that the biblical narratives found their full meaning in Christ.

Example: In 1992, a small group of Christians and I spent a few summer months in the book of Leviticus. We had one objective: to find Jesus Christ in it. Using this approach, the entire book opened up to us. We saw Christ on every page. As I recall that experience, I remember realizing just how “sweet” Christ is as a compassionate Savior who saves us to the uttermost.

We discovered that each of the offerings mentioned in Leviticus point to a different aspect of Christ in His atoning work. And so do the feasts.

Today, there’s a lot of debate on the different models of atonement. The book of Leviticus, read Christologically, helps shed light on this debate. It shows that the redemptive work of Christ is too rich, too vast, and too multifaceted to be reduced to one or two aspects. Jesus Christ is the reality of the sin offering, the burnt offering, the trespass offering, the meal offering, the drink offering as well as all of Israel’s feasts.

After finding Christ in the book of Leviticus, I couldn’t understand how a Christian could read that book and get anything spiritual out of it unless they read it Christologically.

Before that summer, reading Leviticus was a laborious task that constituted good medicine for insomnia.

Because the Christological approach to Scripture has been so largely forgotten in most Christian circles today, the result is, that on a functional level (not on a formal level), there are whole sections of Scripture that have fallen into disuse and cease to function among God’s people.

It has been said that the way to know a person is through a narrative. The four Gospels function as a narrative disclosing the Person of Jesus to us. But so does the Old Testament. To put it in a sentence: the function of the Biblical narrative in both Old and New Testaments is to set forth the identity of Jesus Christ.

Jesus—the Teacher of Scripture

In his seminal book, *According to the Scriptures*, C.H. Dodd traces the way that the New Testament authors quote the Old Testament. In so doing, he finds a pattern. The biblical authors all seem to share a common hermeneutic for understanding the Old Testament. Dodd powerfully argues that the source of this common hermeneutic was Jesus Himself. Jesus Christ taught His disciples how to understand the Old Testament Scriptures, and this is reflected throughout the New Testament writings.

Simply put, the hermeneutical key that Jesus passed on to His disciples was to see Scripture as fulfilled in Himself. Note the following texts where Jesus Himself handles the Scriptures in this way:

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself . . . Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Luke 24:27, 31

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. Luke 24:44-45

Note that the three sections of the Old Testament canon—the Torah (the Law of Moses), the Prophets, and the Writings (the Psalms)—*all* speak of Jesus Christ. When Jesus unveiled this truth to them, *their minds were opened to understand the Scriptures.*

So again, the real and total meaning of Scripture is found in Jesus Christ—His Person, His mission, and His work. He is the fulfillment of all Scripture—including the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. Consider His own words:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Matthew 5:17

Hans Frei, the 20th-century professor at Yale, marked a new shift for returning to the Christological way of interpreting Scripture that pre-dates the modern hermeneutic. Frei remarked that a Christological reading of the Old Testament is indispensable if we are going to understand history as the story of God revealing Himself in Jesus.

Frei redefined the literal interpretation of Scripture. He argued that the church's understanding of Scripture is basically found in Jesus Christ.

Herein lies the charter for Christological interpretation.

To understand the full meaning of Scripture, then, one cannot simply adopt a method of interpretation derived from secular hermeneutic philosophy and start applying it to the Bible.

In this connection, Brevard Childs (also from Yale) is mostly known for his contribution to canonical criticism. Canonical criticism basically says that every part of the Bible must be interpreted in its relationship to the entire canon. Therefore, when the NT was created and the canon expanded, the meaning of the OT actually changed from our perspective. It became fuller. Why? Because now it could be completely interpreted from the standpoint of Christ.

Recall how the resurrected Christ interpreted the Scriptures beginning from Moses through the Prophets to Cleopas and his companion on their walk to Emmaus. Post-resurrection interpretation goes beyond authorial intent. The modern hermeneutic rejects this. According to the modern hermeneutic, authorial intention *is* the meaning of a particular text – period. Christological interpretations of the OT that would be figurative or typological are rejected out of hand.

Note that Childs, like myself, accepted historical criticism. But his position was that historical criticism is a good beginning, but not a good stopping place. We don't stop with the historical information of the text. We rather go on to see the fullness of the canon. Thus Childs didn't deny historical criticism. The problem is that some have been setting canonical criticism and historical criticism up as an either/or choice. But that's a false choice. One can advocate the historical study of Scripture and yet say that historical study needs to be inserted into a larger and richer context, i.e., the existing canon of Scripture which contains a revelation of Jesus Christ.

The truth of the matter is that the Bible has its own hermeneutic.

Examples of the Christological Hermeneutic

Let's look at some examples of how the New Testament authors interpreted the Scriptures Christologically. You will see that they were all good students of Jesus, adopting the method of biblical interpretation that He passed on to them. The Bible is filled with examples of this approach. What follows is only a small sampling of them.

Romans 5:14 - Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.

Here Paul says that Adam was a pattern or a picture of Jesus Christ. Karl Barth argued that many Christians have misunderstood this text, taking it to mean that we must understand Christ in terms of Adam. But the text says that Adam should be understood in terms of Christ. In other words, Adam is a shadow of Christ, and Christ is the fulfillment and reality of that shadow.

This doesn't suggest that Adam was not a historical person. But it does mean that he depicted Jesus Christ. (Reading Scripture Christologically does not dehistoricize the text.)

In the same spirit, Paul calls Jesus "the last Adam" in 1 Corinthians 15:45. (This insight throws considerable light on the full meaning of Genesis 1 and 2.)

In 1 Corinthians 5:7, Paul says that "Christ is our Passover lamb."

In 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, Paul takes a Christological interpretation of the Exodus narrative saying, *For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.*

According to Paul, Moses portrays Christ—the great deliverer. The passing through the Red Sea portrays water baptism into Christ. The rock that followed Israel was a picture of Christ also. (Note that the rock was struck and out of it poured water. Jesus Christ was struck with death and out of Him flowed living water.)

In John Chapter 6, Jesus presents Himself as the reality of the manna in the wilderness. In John Chapter 4, He presents Himself as living water. Christ is the real manna, the real water, the real rock, and the real lamb—all of which were pictured in the Old Testament narrative.

In Colossians 2:16-17, Paul continues this line of interpretation asserting that the Old Testament festivals, sabbaths, ceremonial foods and drinks were a picture—or a shadow—of Jesus Christ.

He writes, *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*

Peter carries on this Christological approach when he unveils the real meaning of the story of Noah's ark, showing it to be a picture of water baptism in Christ (1 Peter 3:20-22).

The book of Hebrews is saturated with the Christological hermeneutic. According to the author, Christ is the reality and fulfillment of Moses and Joshua—He is the new Moses and the new Joshua (Chapters 3 and 4); Christ is the reality and fulfillment of the Sabbath (Chapter 4); He is the reality and fulfillment of the Old Testament high priest. He is the reality and fulfillment of Melchizedek and Aaron (Chapters 5 through 7). The tabernacle and the tabernacle furniture, along with the Old Testament sacrifices were pictures, shadows, and types of Jesus Christ and His work (Chapters 8 through 10).

Near the end of the epistle, the author of Hebrews summarizes the real meaning of the Torah saying, *The Torah is only a shadow of the good things that were coming—not the realities themselves. Hebrews 10:1*

The interpretative key to all Scripture is Christ. He is the pattern of the entire Word of God—the lens for understanding the narrative sweep of the Bible. This should not surprise us since Christ is the revelation of God and the incarnation of God’s grand purpose.

As John Calvin aptly put it, “The Scriptures should be read with the aim of finding Christ in them. Whoever turns aside from this object, even though he wears himself out all his life in learning, he will never reach the knowledge of the truth.”

Let’s quickly look at the Old Testament narrative of Isaac. He is a beautiful picture of Jesus Christ. The same is true for Adam, Melchizedek, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, etc. But for the sake of time and space, we’ll just consider Isaac.

* Jesus and Isaac are the only two people in the entire Scripture who are referred to as “the only begotten son” (John 1:18; Hebrews 11:17).

* Isaac is the promised seed (Genesis 17:16). Jesus Christ is the promised seed (Galatians 3:16).

* Isaac's birth was a miracle as it was physically impossible for him to be conceived (Genesis 17:17-19). Jesus Christ's birth was miraculous as well (Matthew 1:18-25).

* Abraham was instructed to sacrifice Isaac his son (Genesis 22:1-2). God the Father spared not His only Son, Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Romans 8:32).

* The sacrifice of Isaac was on Mount Moriah. (Genesis 22:1-2) Moriah was located on a hill in what would later be called Jerusalem. Jesus Christ died on a hill outside of Jerusalem.

* Isaac was obedient to his father unto death (Genesis 22:5-12). Jesus Christ was obedient to His Father unto death (Philippians 2:5-8).

* Isaac was considered dead by his father for three days (Genesis 22:4). Jesus Christ was dead for three days (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

* Isaac carried wood for his own sacrifice (Genesis 22:6). Jesus Christ bore His own cross, which was made of wood (John 19:17-18).

* After the obedience of Isaac, his mother Sarah died (Genesis 23:1). After the death of Christ, the nation of Israel was set aside (Romans 9-11).

* Abraham gave all things to Isaac (Genesis 25:5). God has given all things to Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:22; Hebrews 1:2).

There are other corresponding points that show how Isaac foreshadowed Christ, but these will suffice.

Hans Frei said that a Christological reading of the Old Testament was in “bad odor today” simply because it was pre-modern. But he espoused it because it’s the only way to find Christ in many Old Testament texts.

Speaking of the Christological hermeneutic, Frei remarks, “Not only Old Testament narrative, but its legal texts and its prophetic as well as wisdom literature are taken to point beyond themselves to their fulfillment in the New Testament. The Jewish texts are taken as types of the story of Jesus as their common antitype—an appropriating procedure that begins in the New Testament, notably in the letters of Paul, the letter to the Hebrews and the Synoptic Gospels, and then becomes a common characteristic of the Christian tradition of scriptural interpretation until modern times.”

In order to grasp the full meaning of the Old Testament text, we must understand the shadows, pictures, and types that the Old Testament narrative contains to reveal Jesus Christ, and His counterpart, the church.

To put it another way, the Christological interpretation of Scripture is a return to the text as it understands itself.

As Rich Lusk put it, “All of Scripture is held together by its testimony of Christ. The Old Covenant Scriptures foreshadow His coming, often in puzzling and paradoxical ways. The New Covenant records His coming and unpacks its meaning. All the types and shadows of the old aeon converge upon Him; from Him emerges a new creation and a transformed Israel.”

Toward an Ecclesial Hermeneutic

Perhaps one of the reasons that some have been reluctant to take a Christological approach to the Old Testament is that they fear the danger of over-allegorization. This fear, however, is rooted in the benighted idea that the Bible can be fully understood by the individual Christian.

I concur with John Howard Yoder in his “hermeneutic of peoplehood.” The biblical text was meant to be understood, not by an individual, but by an interpretative community. That interpretative community is egalitarian—it’s neither comprised of nor directed by a clergy. It is the people of God seeking meaning out of the text by the Holy Spirit together.

All the churches in the New Testament were grassroots, interpretative communities.

An interpretative community that is centered on Jesus Christ will be able to bring out the multifaceted richness of the Biblical text. As each member of the Body seeks to find Christ in Scripture together, all of His glorious aspects can be extracted, uncovered, and grasped. The result is the edification and spiritual nourishment of the community.

As David Buttrick says, "Virtually everything in scripture is written to a faith-community, usually in the style of communal address. Therefore, biblical texts must be set in *communal* consciousness to be understood."

The believing community provides a sort of checks and balances, safeguarding the church from over-allegorizing the text and from falling prey to fanciful and bogus interpretations. If someone goes too far in one direction, someone else is present to pull them back in. This is the genius of Christian community.

I do not say this as an arm-chair philosopher. I have lived in such communities for the past twenty years.

Consequently, I am not only arguing for a Christological hermeneutic, I am arguing equally for an ecclesial hermeneutic where the members of a Christian community wrestle with the biblical text together, and seek to find Jesus Christ in them.

This ecclesial approach is completely at odds with today's common hermeneutic of the individual going into his closet and interpreting Scripture all by himself. Equally so, it's at odds with the notion that biblical interpretation is the sole property of the scholar who uses his scholarly tools in his personal study as he pours over the text by himself.

John Goldingay isolates the point beautifully when he says, "It can seem as if biblical scholars are the privileged interpreters of scripture. They alone can determine what the Bible means. But the Bible was written for believing communities, not critics, and real biblical interpretation happens when scripture does something to such a community. When the church places special emphasis on an academic and critical approach to scripture, it easily sets up a new type of priestly control of the Christian community by a guild of experts whose work is authoritarian, not in the sense that it cannot be questioned, but in the sense that it is the privileged responsibility of an elite."

Goldingay goes on to say that the academic approach to Scripture can help a particular community identify its interpretative biases and prevent it from interpreting the Scriptures in light of its own traditions. He sums up his argument by saying, "Interpretation takes place in the context of both the church community and the academic community. We must believe and strive for interpretation that enables these to compliment each other even insofar as they stand in tension with each other."

Interpreting the New Testament

Note that the Christological approach to Scripture applies to the New Testament as much as it does to the Old. I have heard men and women preach and teach from the New Testament and yet miss the central message of Scripture in the process—which is Jesus Christ.

Contrary to popular belief, the Bible is not a manual for Christian behavior and church practice. It's a revelation of *Emmanuel*—the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

It's all too common for preachers and teachers today to extract from the New Testament rules, commands, abstract ideas, theories, concepts, and inspiring thoughts, yet fail to present the glorious Person of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament itself teaches that the outstanding mark of New Covenant ministry is the unveiling of Christ. In his comparison of Old Testament ministry versus New Testament ministry, Paul sums up the difference saying, *We preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:5*

A careful reading of the New Testament clearly shows that its overarching message is Christ. In the Gospels, the subject is Jesus Christ in His earthly life and ministry. In the Gospel of John, we find many hints about His preexistent life. In the book of Acts, we see the apostles preaching Christ. We also see Christ operating through His Body as it expands from Jerusalem to Rome. The epistles reveal the unsearchable riches of Christ and apply the Lord's mind to crisis situations that confronted the early churches. The book of Revelation is a revelation of Christ in His triumphant victory over the world system.

Yet regardless of the above, it is possible to miss the Person of Christ in the New Testament and instead present something other than Him through them.

To see just how full of Christ the New Testament is, I challenge you to take one of Paul's epistles and count the number of times he mentions or refers to Jesus Christ. Do this for the first chapter of Ephesians or the first chapter of Colossians, for example. The number of times Paul refers to Christ will astound you.

Paul was a man driven by a revelation of his Lord.

And herein lies the basis of all New Testament ministry.

Consequently, one of the tasks of Christian ministry is to extract Jesus Christ from the Scriptures and present Him in a living way to God's people.

So the next time you hear a person preach or teach from the Bible, ask yourself: Is this person giving me Jesus Christ . . . are they revealing Christ to me . . . or are they giving me something else?

Jesus Christ is the Christian life. And God the Father has chosen to speak of Him in every age.

Knowing Him, being conformed to His image, and expressing Him in the world with other believers is the goal of the Christian life.

In summary, to properly understand the full meaning of Scripture, two things are necessary:

1. Availing ourselves of all forms of biblical interpretation—including the Christological hermeneutic that the Bible itself contains.
2. Interpreting the Bible as part of an interpretive Christian community rather than as an isolated individual. That community should be willing to draw on the rich history of the Christian church, from the Church Fathers, to the Anabaptists, to the Puritans, to the eastern and western branches of the historic church, etc.

Fleshing It Out

In closing, here are some practical tips that will help you find Jesus Christ in Scripture:

1. Before you read a text, remind yourself of the Christocentric nature of Divine revelation. The Bible contains one revelation and that revelation is a Person—the *Lord Jesus Christ*. Therefore, a proper understanding of any text will always lead you to discover more of Christ. Your ultimate goal in reading the Bible is to find Him.
2. Ask yourself when reading a text: “What does this text tell me about Jesus Christ?” That question will get you to the real meaning of the text.
3. If you can’t find Christ in the way that you’re reading a text, then get on different mountain from which to view it. Look at it through a different lens. I suggest you read a book entitled *Notes on the Pentateuch* by C.H. Mackintosh. The book is an exegetical treasury on the Old Testament that glorifies your Lord. D.L. Moody once said that if all the books in the entire world were to be burned, he would be satisfied to have just one copy of the Bible and C.H. Mackintosh’s *Notes on the Pentateuch*. I am also writing a book entitled *From Eternity to Here* which will be released in the Spring of 2009. This book seeks to unlock the grand narrative of Scripture. In it, both Old and New Testaments are unfolded in a Christological way.

4. Interpret the Scriptures with other believers and avail yourself of all the light that the Body of Christ has shed on the Bible in the past and present. Remember, the Bible is addressed to the community of God's people. And it invites that community to let the biblical narratives shape its vision of the world. Therefore, it's the ecclesial community that is called to interpret and live out the message of Scripture, not the isolated believer.

5. Discover ways of interacting with Jesus Christ through Scripture. Here are three exercises you can try:

(1) Read the Gospels and the Epistles autobiographically — from the viewpoint of Jesus Christ. This approach owes much to Frank Laubach in his book, *The Autobiography of Jesus*. It allows the reader to understand Scripture from a whole new perspective and to listen to the voice of Christ through it:

Example 1: "When I entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, I said, 'Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.' But they laughed at me. After the crowd had been put outside, I went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. News of this spread through all that region. As I went on from there, two blind men followed me, calling out, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David!'" (Matthew 9:23-27)

Example 2: "For by me all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by me and for me. I am before all things, and in me all things hold together. And I am the head of the body, the church; I am the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything I might have the supremacy." (Colossians 1:16-18)

(2) Read the Psalms in the voice of Christ. Thomas Merton in his book *Bread in the Wilderness* said that the main speaker of the Psalms is Jesus Christ. Sometimes it is Jesus Christ in His people. Sometimes it is Jesus Christ in David. But it is always Jesus Christ who is speaking. When you recite the Psalms, therefore, you are in a sense speaking the words of Christ, uniting yourself with Him, being pulled into His presence.

Example: "Father, you are my Shepherd, I shall not want. You make me lie down in green pastures. You lead me beside the still waters. Father, you restore my soul. You guide me in paths of righteousness for your name's sake." (Psalm 23:1-3)

(3) Praying the Scripture. This approach is ancient, tracing back to the Patristic period. It is known as *lectio divina* — sacred reading.

Example: “Lord Jesus, I have been crucified with you and I no longer live, but you live in me. The life I live in my body, I live by faith in you—for you love me and you gave yourself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

Sources

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Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture by Brevard Childs.

Jesus the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible by Eugen J. Pentz.

Models of Interpretation of Scripture by John Goldingay.

Notes on the Pentateuch by C.H. Mackintosh.

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Reading in Communion by Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones.

The Christotelic Spiral by Rich Lusk.

The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative by Hans W. Frei.

The Great Code by Northrop Frye.

“The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood” by John H. Yoder in *The Priestly Kingdom*.

“The ‘Literal Reading’ of the Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Will it Bend or Will it Break?” by Hans W. Frei in Frank McConnell’s *The Bible and Narrative Tradition*.

The Old Testament as the Book of Christ by Martin Kuske.

“The Reasonableness of Typology” by G.W.H. Lampe in *Essays in Typology*.

Typology of Scripture by Patrick Fairbairn.

Virtuoso Theology: The Bible and Interpretation by Frances Young.

Ye Search the Scriptures by Watchman Nee.

Thanks also to my friends, Frank Valdez and Jon Zens.

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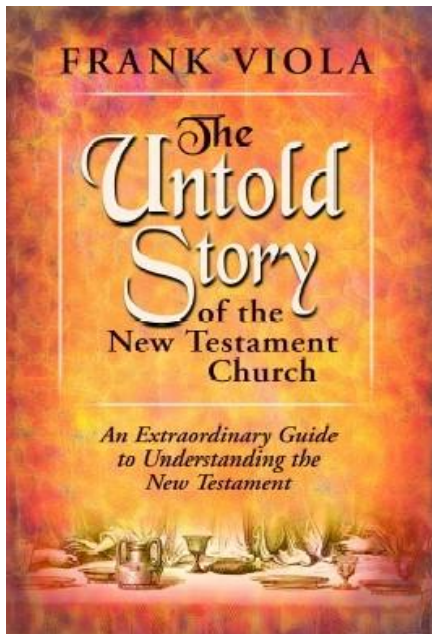
If you wish to dialogue with Frank about this article, you may email him at Violabooks@aol.com

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THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

An Extraordinary Guide to Understanding the New Testament

by Frank Viola



Watch the New Testament come alive. Understand God's Word like never before.

Introducing . . . a fully documented piece of scholarship that brings you back into the first century and shows you what really happened.

Let's face it. The New Testament is often hard to understand. A major reason is because it is not arranged in chronological order. Paul's letters, for example, are arranged by size rather than chronologically. This makes the New Testament a bit like a Chinese puzzle. For this reason, one famous Bible scholar said that reading the New Testament letters is like hearing one end of a phone conversation. This book reconstructs the other end so that you can understand virtually every word.

The Untold Story of the New Testament Church is a unique Bible handbook that weaves Acts and the Epistles together chronologically . . . creating one fluid story. This epic volume gives readers a first-hand account of the New Testament drama that is riveting and enlightening. It includes dates, maps, and background information about the people, the cities, and the events of the first-century church using a "you-are-there" approach.

Get up-close and personal with apostles Paul, Peter, James and John and learn of their personal struggles. Understand the circumstances behind each inspired letter they penned. Watch the chaotic swirl of first-century people and events fall into place before your very eyes. Discover what Paul's "thorn in the flesh" really was. Learn what happened to all the apostles after the book of Acts was finished. Be ushered into the living, breathing atmosphere of the first century and uncover the hidden riches found in God's Word.

The book includes the following:

- The entire background, including the historical setting and sociological context, that lies behind each New Testament letter. You will learn what caused the New Testament authors to write their letters, when they wrote them, who they wrote them to, and what they were specifically addressing.
- Dates and times of all of the major events that occurred in the New Testament, including when each letter was written and where it was written from.
- Dates and times of the major historical events of secular history interwoven with the New Testament story.
- Maps of all four of Paul's church planting trips and his journey to Rome.
- An explanation of all of the major cities where each church was planted, a sociological profile of what the people were like in each city, and what they experienced in their daily lives.
- A user-friendly guide to take you through each New Testament book after you have learned the entire historical setting for each one. This will help you to understand each New Testament letter in a brand new way.
- Endnotes containing Scripture and historical details plus an extensive bibliography so that you can reconstruct the entire story for yourself.

Endorsements

Frank Viola has produced a useful and engaging account of the New Testament Church, helpfully setting people and events within their first-century cultural context. While not everyone will agree with every detail of the author's reconstruction or theological interpretation, for any such retelling unavoidably involves some interpretation, still this account helps contemporary believers more fully appreciate the remarkable dynamism of our earliest Christian forebears.

Howard A. Snyder, author, *The Community of the King, Liberating the Laity, A Kingdom Manifesto, Decoding the Church*

Frank Viola has given us a different kind of church history, a history not of the institution but of the Body. It focuses on the people of God and their struggles; on Paul and his converts, enemies, disciples, and friends; on Peter and John and the churches they birthed and raised. Frank's book emphasizes what went forward among the saints to create eternal value rather than what happened politically to create the church of subsequent centuries. Although most history is written by the winners to justify their victory, *The Untold Story* gives us a history of the early churches as God's own people, whether they were ultimately victorious or troubled.

Hal Miller, author, *Christian Community: Biblical or Optional?*

Many of us have been challenged by Frank's previous books examining New Testament church life and practice. Now with this story, focused on helping us see the church in its New Testament context, but in appropriate chronological order, we are greatly helped to understand the various letters of the New Testament. When you see the writings of Peter and Paul and John and the context into which they wrote, it helps make the why of their letters as clear as the what! Read this book at one sitting and you will marvel as the story of the early church unfolds before your very eyes.

Tony Dale, Editor, *House 2 House* magazine

This volume has provided much needed information that is now in one place for the first time! Read it as I did with a highlighter pen in hand! Thanks, Frank, for the way you let the Lord use you in preparing this for the rest of us!

Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr., author, *Where Shall We Go From Here?*

Frank Viola has done it again! This time he weaves the New Testament together in a single, chronological story. I love it! We will be promoting this book and I will be giving it to friends this year as gifts.

Nate Krupp, author, *Gods Simple Plan for His Church*