

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#22 Why Does Figural Preaching Matter?

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Today's question: "I would like to ask a two-part question: (a) could you give a defense from the Scripture for figural preaching and typological reading; (b) how would you respond to the criticism of typological exegesis as a way seeking hidden meanings and connection that probably no one else has noticed, thus focused a lot on novelty?"

Within the video, I reference this recent talk I gave on the subject of the transfigural reading of Scripture: <https://englishlabri.podbean.com/e/seeing-the-transfigured-word-alastair-roberts/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is as follows. I would like to ask a two-part question.

A. Could you give defense from scripture for figural preaching and typological reading? And B. How would you respond to the criticism of typological exegesis as a way of seeking hidden meaning and connection that probably no one else has noticed, thus focused a lot on novelty? Good questions. I think the the most helpful thing I've found is just looking at the way that the apostles use the Old Testament and the way that the scripture more generally uses itself, whether within Old or New Testament. When you look at the way the scripture uses itself, you're left with a problem.

Either you argue that the apostles, for instance, are using some sort of special

permission to use the Bible in a way that violates the principles of proper exegesis that you were taught in your biblical studies class, or they're reading the Bible in a way that we can learn from. Now, I found it very hard to believe that the apostles were violating the text in order to arrive at meanings that help us to see Christ, but which are really doing violence to the text as it actually functions within its original context. However, when you look at the texts and learn to read them typologically, the apostles' reading of these texts makes perfect sense.

So if you want to have a defense from scripture, I would say just look through the New Testament. Look at the way that the apostles and the evangelists and others use the scripture. Look at the way that Paul, for instance, talks about the Israelites as those baptized into Moses, and in the cloud and in the sea as those who drank the same spiritual drink and ate the same spiritual food, speaking of manna and the water from the rock as related to Christ, that Christ is the rock that follows them.

Or the allegory of Sarah and Hagar and their sons and how that relates to Jews and Gentiles and the relationship between Judaizers and the Jew-Gentile church. Or how about the relationship between David and Christ, or between Abraham and the believer, or between baptism and the flood and the ark, or in 1 Peter. Or what about all the stuff that you find within the context of Revelation with a deep web, a vast web of intertextual allusions, very few direct references.

Or what about something like the beginning of Matthew, where you see, out of Egypt I called my son, or many of the other references that we see within the Gospels, and seemingly clear allusions to the Old Testament. When Jesus talks to the disciples, he explains himself from the Old Testament. He gives them the eyes to see him revealed in the Old Testament.

Now, how do we believe that Christ is revealed in the Old Testament? Merely in terms of explicit prophecies? Well, many of those explicit prophecies, although they're applied to Christ in the New Testament, do not directly apply to Christ in the original context. There are verses from the prophets that seemingly wrench from their contexts. Out of Egypt I called my son is not originally applied to Christ.

That would seemingly do violence to the context to apply that to Christ. But yet that's what Matthew does. And so to understand the way that the apostles use the Bible, the way that the New Testament writers more generally use the Bible, I think you need to have some sort of typological understanding of what's going on.

Either they're engaged in some sort of, even they're enjoying some sort of hermeneutical license, or they've got some particular revelation that they have that's peculiar to them that enables them to see meanings that are not accessible to anyone else. I believe there are problems when we take that sort of line, although many have taken it. I think when we take that sort of line, we end up with a position where Christ

does not actually open people's eyes to understand the scripture.

There's just a few select cases where we're given a secondary meaning that these texts can take. And the original meaning, it's not as if the Christian whose eyes are opened can go to this text and learn from it. No, there's these texts do not actually contain Christ within them in that way.

That typological reading is foisted upon them to some degree. Now, I recently posted the audio of a talk I gave at L'Abris down in Hampshire, where I go through the story of the transfiguration and the theme of transfiguration more generally and speak about the transfigured word, how scripture is transfigured. So it's not just figural reading, but transfigural reading.

And Paul, when he argues this case, will bring us back to the Old Testament, retrace our steps, give us a familiar story, the story of Moses covering his face after meeting with God, and then so that the people don't see him and the glory on his face. And he will relate that to the experience of the Christian with the word of God. Now, this is quite a daring use of that original text.

But when you actually read the text in context and see Paul's argument, it makes sense. And it makes sense precisely because he's doing, he's showing as well as doing, he's showing the way that a text that is not seemingly about Christ, when we look at it with New Testament eyes, it's as if it's opened up, a veil is removed. And we can see in that text, in Moses, in Moses the books, we can see a witness to Christ.

The Old Testament is like a darkened room where you hear approaching footsteps and you stumble around feeling for the furniture to see what's within that room, the room that tells the shape of God's salvation. And then the door is flung open, light streams in to the darkened room. And the one who you once heard approaching and speculated on who this person could be, but you heard these approaching footsteps, now you see that person's face.

And in Christ, this is really what we see with the Old Testament, that the Old Testament is opened up in a new way. And these familiar stories are revealed to have a deeper meaning than we might have expected before. We knew that they were pointing beyond themselves, that they were straining for something greater.

But now we can make sense of it. And this, I believe, is what Jesus is referring to when he talks about opening their eyes to perceive the scripture. And the way that Jesus talks to the disciples on the road to Emmaus and explains from the scripture that all these things must be the case.

It's not a matter of just stringing together a few isolated themes of prophecy. It's showing that the deep heart of the text, the stories of fall and creation, the story of

Exodus, the story of the kingdom, the story of the exile, all these themes develop and culminate in Christ. And so Christ comes as the fulfillment of all that has gone before, not as some mere assemblage of these prophecies stuck together as if we're sellotape to get this artificial sense of unity.

Rather, this is something that arises in the very heart of these themes from the Old Testament. Now, I've described this way of approaching scripture as a musical one where you recognize themes as they develop and they expand. And as these themes develop, you can make a lot more sense of the broader unity of the text and how each part fits into that.

Because a theme helps us to understand not just the unity, but also the variations. So when we come to Christ, once we had this figural reading, we can read things a lot better than we would do otherwise because we have all these people that we can juxtapose Christ with, all these events that we can see him as the culmination of. And it's no longer just an isolated sequence of events, a series of verses that we can appeal to for different purposes.

No, it's a unified history. Now, for preaching, I think this is particularly important because preaching is, there are different ways of approaching preaching. Topical preaching often can approach the task of preaching with the concerns of our world.

And we bring the concerns of our world to the world of the text and think how can the world of the text address these concerns that are the pressing ones within the context of our world. Expository, expository preaching is a different approach, which often takes the world of the text as the starting point and sees the world of the text as, okay, we have our world over here and we have the world of the text over here. And let's look deeply at the world of the text and think if we can bring some bridge over to our world and maybe create some sort of traffic between the two so we can move things across and learn some principles that can relate to us and seek for some helpful parallels.

Whereas figural or typological preaching is an approach that is situating the hearer within the music of the text, helping the hearer to understand that they are not coming to this text as those who exist outside of it, but as those who are to be brought within it to hear this text as a text addressed to us directly, a text that looks us directly in the eye, that this is a text about us, it's a text for us, and it's a text, it's a story that we live within. We've been caught up within the music of scripture and that helps us to relate, among other things, preaching to the celebration of the sacraments because in the celebration of the sacraments, we are playing out the music of scripture in various ways. So when you're celebrating the Lord's Supper, you're celebrating an event that recalls Melchizedek bringing out bread and wine to Abraham after the defeat of the kings.

Or it's like Lady Wisdom who has prepared her feast, bread and wine, and invites people in to learn wisdom and to partake of her food. Or it could be seen as the memorial

sacrifices, the drink offering and the grain offering, or it could be seen as the way that God has given bread to strengthen the heart of man and wine to make man's heart glad. Or all of these other themes that we have within scripture, and these themes help us to unite scripture within this one unified text, this one unified piece of music, as it were, this musical symphony of God's redemption.

And within that, we can find our place and we can find our place as we participate within the music, as our bodies are caught up in the music in this moment in time. So the story of baptism is the story of the threefold baptism of Christ, the baptism in the Jordan, the baptism of his death, and the baptism of the church at Pentecost, whereby the church is made to participate in and succeed from Christ's baptisms. Likewise, we have baptism related to the Red Sea Crossing, baptism related to the flood, baptism related to the baptisms of the priests in the Old Testament, baptisms related to the setting apart of the prophets for their ministry, like the crossing of the Jordan in the case of Elijah and Elisha.

Or it can be entrance into the promised land with Joshua, it could be struggle with the angel at the Ford of the Jabbok with Jacob, or it could be a host of other events, Naaman and his leprosy being cleansed. These are all stories that are evoked by the practice of baptism. And they're evoked not just as neat parallels that exist outside in this other text out there, and we exist in our world and the world of the text is here, and here's some neat parallels between the two that are kind of cute homiletical devices that stir people up, and there's a poetic thrill to it, but nothing more than that.

No, the point of this is to show that we are part of this story, that these connections are connections that we participate in, that this story has continued into the present and we are drawn into it. It's one of the things that we focus upon within our Andrew Wilson and I, in our book, *Echoes of Exodus*. We get into this in depth to try and help people to understand that this story is unified by these shared themes, and it's also a way of bringing the reader into the text to recognize that we are the heirs and the executors of the biblical testament, that this isn't a text that is written for them back then, it's written for us here and now, and it's a book that looks us directly in the eye.

It's a book to be performed. It's a book that's alive, that's living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, as the word of God divides between joints and marrow, and speaks to the inner depths of our hearts, and also relates to our world, that our world is absorbed within the world of the text. And preaching is a way of bringing people into this world, showing the resonance of this world, and the way that our particular situation within it can be explained by these other events that have happened in the past, that we can find our place, we can get our bearings and our orientation in the world that we exist in, through entrance into the music of the text.

Now, how would I respond to the criticisms of typological exegesis as just seeking hidden meanings and neat connect, and odd connections that no one's noticed, and thus

focused a lot on novelty? Well, a lot of typological exegesis is a matter of taking the big branches of typological connection, the big motifs of scripture, and exploring the smaller branches of those, the smaller twigs that arise off that great big branch of a particular typology, and then looking even beyond those twigs into the little leaves here and there. So the leaves might be a verbal parallel at some point, and many of those things, if they fall off the tree, it doesn't really matter that much. But the more that you see these branches that have lots of little branches, smaller branches going off them, and then twigs going off those and leaves, and the whole text being this vast intertextual structure, this typological network, it helps you to make sense of what's going on.

But it's important to have these things in their proper priority. So much of the typology that I'm discussing in these videos, for instance, is not the most basic typology. The most basic typology, for instance, is things like the new creation and the old creation.

That typological connection between Eden and the new heavens and the new earth, between the situation in the garden and the situation in the new Jerusalem, that's a basic, very basic typological connection. And there's a lot of things that arise from that. A lot of things that are part of, grow upon that branch.

But that branch itself is the most important thing. Or we can think about the Exodus as a motif, to understand Christ's work in terms of the Exodus, or understand Christ's sacrifice in terms of the sacrificial system. Again, these are primary motifs.

And then there are other things that develop out of that. Much of the sense that typology is just about novelty is a failure to recognize or a failure to be clear, perhaps, on the part of the person explaining the typology, that this is an elaboration of a more basic set of connections. That these connections are not just lots of isolated things.

But what we're dealing with is, from one way of looking at it, it could be seen as a vast root system, where all these things are connected together in mutually reinforcing networks. Or it can be seen as all these branches with lots of little branches going off them, twigs and leaves and all these different things that it doesn't... Not everything bears the same weight. Not everything is primary in the same way.

Not everything bears the central life of the tree. But things are important and things can help. Those other things are important and they can help to elaborate, to fill out, to give us a clearer sense of the significance of a particular branch.

So once you've noticed the Exodus motif, there are lots of things that arise from that. And most of them are of lesser importance. It's not that important that you notice the Exodus motifs in the story of Elijah and Elisha.

It really helps you to read that story if you do. But if you don't, it's not the end of the world. Likewise with the story of Solomon or with the story of David or all these other

stories.

It really helps but it's not really important. Not as important as it is to recognize those motifs in the story of Christ, for instance. And so it's important to get these things in their proper place, to understand why we are concerned with these motifs and these smaller details.

We're concerned with the smaller details because they are part of the big branch. They go off from that branch. And if they snap off, the big branch still remains.

But the branch actually is expressed, the life of the branch is expressed within all these smaller branches that arise out from it. And all the leaves that are born by that. So the small typological connections or the small verbal allusions, which maybe don't bear much weight, maybe aren't that sure.

But they really help to show you this is an important branch. Once you've seen the Exodus, that big branch, and you've not just focused upon its direct connection with Christ, but you've thought about the way that all these branches develop off from it throughout the whole of Scripture. And when Christ comes, it's a fuller development of all those other things.

Then it will make a lot more sense for you. And you'll be able to see that this is not just a one-to-one parallel between the original event and Christ, type-antitype, and that's all it is. Rather, it's a great branch of a biblical motif that bears a lot of other things upon it.

And the full weight of that branch with all the different things that it bears is brought to its completion in Christ. That Christ is the one ultimately that bears all of that weight. And so the danger that we face is of losing ourselves in the small branches, in the skinny branches, when we need to focus upon the really thick primary branches that bear the real weight.

But if we just focus upon those and miss the small branches, the skinny branches, the leaves and the twigs and all these smaller details, we'll miss the full shape and the full glory and the full wonder and the weight of these branches. And so that's a limited analogy, but I hope it helps to explain what exactly is going on and why there is a place for an exploration of small details that may be less certain but are nonetheless important for filling out the big picture. And the big picture is about those primary thick branches that bear the great weight.

But once you've got all those things together and you stand back, what you see is a majestic tree, a single tree, where all these different parts are united together, where these things grow out of a single trunk, where all these different branches that bear the weight of everything that grows out from them are majestic and glorious and beautiful. And you can be awestruck as you see them in their unity, that these are not just a

selection of twigs lined up in sequence, but it's a unified tree. And the great weight of that is born upon this great trunk of Christ.

Christ is the one who is revealed to bear all of the weight, all the promises, yea and amen and hymn, all this history that's summed up in him. And I think that gives us a clearer sense of why, again, we should be teaching typology, because typology helps us to understand scripture as a unified story. And this is something that the apostles were always doing.

They're always bringing people back to the story of scripture, bringing in all these characters from scripture, the whole list of the people of faith, this great hall of heroes, as we see in somewhere like Hebrews 11. And you see each one of these characters brought out, and that would not be made complete apart from Christ. And so Christ is the author and finisher of faith, the one who finishes this great and brings to perfection this whole great story.

It helps us to understand all these Old Testament stories as leading up to him, as anticipating him. And once we've learned how to read the Bible that way, the Bible becomes our text. It's not just a text for a completely different audience back then.

It's a text for us. It's a text about us. It's a text that we exist within.

And I think that's perhaps the most powerful way to read the Bible. It certainly changed my life, and I hope that it will change the life of many of you here who listen to these discussions. And it's one of the reasons why I want to do these videos to give, and these talks to give people a sense of just how united this text is, just how powerful this text is.

And as you recognize these connections, that you'll recognize that this is your story. This is a story for us here and now, a story about the church in Christ, and about the destiny that we are being drawn towards by the work of his spirit. If you have any further questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account.

I'll leave the link for that. And if you found these videos helpful, please pass them on to your friends. Tell other people about them.

It's great to get more people interested, because ultimately I want more people to share my excitement for these ideas and these truths. And if you'd like to support the production of these videos in the future, in terms of costs of hosting, or my SoundCloud account, or for video equipment, or any of these other things, please consider supporting my Patreon account. Thank you very much, and hopefully see you in the next day or so.