

Old Testament Christians?

Presented to Manoa Valley Church

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Honolulu, Hawaii

February 25, 2007

Good morning!

My topic this morning is “Old Testament Christians?” I have been thinking about this since last year, when one of my long-time acquaintances came up to me at a reception and told me that he was very concerned about “Old Testament Christians.” I had never been concerned about them myself, because I had never heard that phrase before. Old Testament Christians. How could you be an Old Testament Christian?

I asked my friend what he meant, and he said there are three characteristic beliefs of these Old Testament Christians. First, they see God as a warrior God, not a God of love and peace. Second, they believe that God rewards the faithful with material wealth, not just spiritual riches. And third, they believe that it is more important to be holy and exclusive than to be compassionate and inclusive. He said that they found support for these beliefs in the Old Testament, which is why he called them Old Testament Christians.

Now, you and I know that the Bible is so huge, and has so many stories and laws and poems and prophecies, that one can find almost anything in the Bible, especially if one is willing to take a phrase or verse out of context. I don't know about you, but I have occasionally been tempted to do that. We know that if we try hard enough, we can quote the Bible to prove a lot of things. With that in mind, let's look at the three characteristics of Old Testament Christians, and see what the Old Testament says.

The Warrior God

First, Old Testament Christians see God as a warrior God, not a God of love and peace. The warrior God is certainly a powerful image in the Old Testament. God fought for the Israelites in the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan—the Promised Land. Samson and Saul and David killed thousands of their enemies. Sometimes, when a town was captured by

the Israelites, they killed all the men and women and children— *all of them*. This was seen as an offering to God, because the Israelites did not benefit from their conquest— they kept no slaves, and no animals, to serve them after their victory. They killed them all.

Let me give you a specific example. In 1 Samuel 15, we read that the Lord ordered Saul to punish the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belonged to them. He was told to put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys— every living thing. When Saul’s army killed everyone *except* the king of the Amalekites, and did not destroy *all* of the sheep and cattle, the Lord rejected Saul as king and told Samuel to anoint David instead. Saul had not followed the Lord’s instructions— he did not kill enough.

This past year I studied the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk had a vision of a conversation with God during which he learned that Judah would be overrun and destroyed by the cruel Babylonians. Habakkuk saw God as a warrior God protecting Judah, so he was shocked to learn that God was going to allow Judah to be destroyed. While accepting that this was going to happen, Habakkuk looked to the future beyond the devastation and the Babylonian exile. Toward the end of his book, he shared his vision of God marching against the Babylonians, slaying them and setting things right again for the Judeans. Habakkuk never lost his faith, but he didn’t change his belief in God as a warrior God.

The God of Material Wealth

So there is no doubt that God as a warrior God can be found in the Old Testament. How about the second characteristic of Old Testament Christians— the idea that God rewards the faithful with material wealth?

We see this idea often today among those who preach “Prosperity Theology.” People believe that if they are faithful to God, God will reward them not just spiritually, but with material prosperity— a bigger house, a better job, higher salary, and a parking space in front of the stadium.

This idea can certainly be found in the Old Testament. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were faithful and prospered in material terms. And you can browse through Proverbs to find support for this idea. Here is Proverbs 10:22: “The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no

trouble to it.” And then there is Proverbs 13:21: “Misfortune pursues the sinner, but prosperity is the reward of the righteous.” Then there is Proverbs 22:4: “Humility and the fear of the Lord bring wealth and honor and life.”

This idea can be found in the book of Job. Job was faithful, and very prosperous. Then everything was taken away from him. His friends argued that Job must have sinned, or God would not have destroyed his family and his wealth. Job argued back, and said he had done nothing wrong, so it shouldn't have been taken away from him. Clearly, for Job and his friends, the assumption was that the faithful are rewarded with material wealth.

Holy and Exclusive

So there is no doubt that this second belief of Old Testament Christians— that the faithful are rewarded with material prosperity— can be found in the Old Testament. How about the third belief of the Old Testament Christians, that it is more important to be holy and exclusive than compassionate and inclusive?

This is an idea that was firmly established in the Jewish community at the time of Jesus. We read in Leviticus 19:1-2: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” Jewish leaders wanted to honor God by being perfectly holy. To them, that meant not doing anything, or being near anyone, whom they considered unclean or unholy. The holiness codes and laws regarding purity can be found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The purity laws literally divided the world into two kinds of people—the clean and the unclean, the acceptable and the unacceptable. It was a rigid system of rituals and laws that created a huge class of people who were considered unclean and unacceptable.

Purity had to do with food and meals, corpses, bodily emissions, childbirth, and bodily imperfections. In some cases, violating the rules of purity was considered wrong and sinful— such as eating forbidden foods. In other cases, violating the purity rules was not wrong or sinful, but the impurity still needed to be removed. Removal might be accomplished by the passage of time, or ritual washing, or sacrifices at the temple.

There was a serious problem with this system, which is that the poor — who constituted about 90 percent of the population— could easily

become permanently impure. The Israelites paid taxes to the Romans and a tithe to the temple authorities. Peasants lived at a subsistence level, and their combined tax and tithe payments could have been anywhere from 28 percent to 40 percent of all their earnings, according to the estimates of scholars.

The poor could not escape paying the Romans, who used military force to collect taxes. That meant that the poor would often fall in debt to the temple. The temple responded by condemning the peasants and labeling them unclean. If a peasant was determined to be unclean, he could not offer a sin offering and receive forgiveness. The temple was closed to him. He was socially ostracized and cut off from reconciliation with his God.

So the emphasis was on holiness and purity laws. The holy were the elite, and they seemed to have no compassion for the poor—the permanently unclean.

Other voices in the Old Testament

So there is a basis in the Old Testament for all three of these beliefs of Old Testament Christians—belief in God as a warrior God, belief that God rewards the faithful with material prosperity, and the belief that it is more important to be holy and exclusive than compassionate and inclusive.

But there is a problem, here. There are *other* voices in the Old Testament.

Let's go back and look again. Not all the images in the Old Testament are about a God of war and violence. Isaiah gives us many images of peace. For example, in Isaiah 2, we read about the nations streaming to the Lord's temple:

He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore. (Is 2:4)

This imagery is repeated later in the book of Micah at 4:1-3. And then there is Isaiah 11:6 that envisions a peaceful kingdom:

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
The calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them...

And then two verses later:

They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. (Isa. 11:9)

So there are images of the God of peace in the Old Testament.

There are also verses that seem to contradict the second belief of the Old Testament Christians, that God rewards the faithful with material wealth. If one continues to browse in Proverbs, one will find this at Proverbs 11:4: "Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death." Then there is Proverbs 11:28: "Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf."

Even more impressive is the entire book of Ecclesiastes, which is a long discourse against power, wealth, fame, and physical pleasure. The voice in Ecclesiastes declares that all those things are ultimately meaningless. At Ecclesiastes 5:10 we read: "Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless." If the faithful are rewarded with material wealth, the reward is meaningless. The only meaning comes from fearing God, and enjoying one's daily work and daily bread.

When it comes to being holy and exclusive, rather than compassionate and inclusive, we find the voice of the prophets. They were passionate about social justice. They attacked the rich and defended the poor. They were angered that empty ritual piety had replaced a living faith, that burnt offerings had replaced true knowledge of and obedience to God. Listen to the prophet Amos at 5: 21-24, where the prophet shared a message from the Lord:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
I cannot stand your assemblies.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Yes, there were those who wished to be holy and exclusive, but other voices were raised, prophetic voices of compassion and inclusion.

So we can see that the first problem with the beliefs of Old Testament Christians is that they are selective—they represent only part of the Old Testament. The second problem is much bigger. The second problem is that Jesus strongly disagreed with the beliefs of Old Testament Christians. In fact, countering those beliefs was a big part of his ministry.

Jesus and Peace

Jesus revealed to us a God of love and peace, not a God of war. He said blessed are the peacemakers, not blessed are the war-makers. He taught us to love our enemies, not to kill them. He said that those who live by the sword, die by the sword. He articulated concepts of non-violent resistance, such as turning the other cheek and walking the extra mile. Scholars describe Jesus as leading the peace movement of his day—a movement that rejected the Zealots who wished to overthrow the Romans by violence, and instead encouraged *nonviolent* resistance. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. both learned about non-violent resistance from the teachings of Jesus.

By the way, Jesus was very practical. Turning the other cheek and walking the extra mile were not only non-violent, but effectively turned the tables on the oppressor. According to one scholar, when a superior slapped a subordinate, he would do it with the back of his right hand. But when an equal slapped an equal, he would use the palm of his hand. So if you were slapped with the back of the hand, and then turned the other cheek, the person who slapped you could no longer slap you with the back of his hand.

He would have to slap you with his palm. That meant he would have to recognize you as an equal.

There was also a twist to walking the extra mile. According to what I have read, Roman law allowed a soldier to order anyone, usually a peasant, to carry his gear for up to a mile. But Roman law forbid a soldier to order a peasant to carry his gear for *more* than a mile. Roman records show that soldiers who made peasants carry their gear for *more* than a mile were punished. The Romans didn't want the peasants carrying gear around all day—they wanted them growing crops and tending their herds so they could pay their taxes. So if a peasant who had carried a soldier's gear for a mile decided to carry it for another mile, he could get the soldier in trouble.

You can imagine what the scene would be like. The soldier would say, "Okay, you've walked a mile, I'll take my gear now," and the peasant would say, "No, that's all right, I'll carry it for another mile." The soldier would say, "No, you can't, you'll get me in trouble, give me my gear," and the peasant would say, "No, I'm fine, I'll keep carrying it." Who has the upper hand now? The peasant. And it's non-violent.

Christians who take the teachings of Jesus seriously are either pacifists, or people who are very reluctant to go to war. Christian theologians have developed a theory of "just war," describing the terms and conditions under which a war might be justified. For example, a war might be justified as a last resort, when all peaceful and diplomatic alternatives have been exhausted. It might be justified as self-defense, or in order to recapture something taken, or to punish significant injustice, or to end an ongoing war and establish peace. One's actions in a war must be restrained, and do the minimum harm, and be directed toward establishing long-term peace and justice. A war is not justified if the goal is material or economic gain.

Of course, not everybody agrees on how to apply these ideas in each case. But we struggle with these ideas, because we know that Jesus calls us to be peacemakers, first and foremost. The God that is revealed through Jesus is not a God of war, but a God of love and peace. There is simply no doubt about it.

Jesus and Wealth

How about the idea that God rewards the faithful with material prosperity? Jesus was very clear about material wealth. He said that “a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” He said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

We know the story of the rich young man who asked Jesus what he must do to get eternal life. Jesus told him to obey the commandments. The rich young man said he had kept the commandments— what did he still lack?

Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. Then Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

So Jesus rejected the second idea of Old Testament Christians that God rewards the faithful with material wealth. Jesus clearly wants us to be spiritually rich, not rich in material things. If we happen to be rich in material things, we are called to share those things with others.

Jesus and Holy Exclusivity

How about the third belief of the Old Testament Christians, that it is better to be holy and exclusive than compassionate and inclusive? Jesus was definitely for compassion and inclusion. He did everything he could do to reach out to the poor, the sick, the disabled, prostitutes, tax collectors—

anyone and everyone considered unclean in the purity system. He broke purity rules by eating with the unclean and healing on the Sabbath. He turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple, the holiest place in Israel.

Many of the purity rules were about externals, such as what you eat. At Mark 7:15 Jesus said: “Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean.” He went on to say a few verses later: “For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”

Jesus was fierce in his attacks on the Pharisees, who gave the highest priority to ritual purity and holiness. The Pharisees were sincere in their desire to be holy, but their desires led them astray. Matthew 23 reports on the seven woes that Jesus pronounced against the Pharisees. The Pharisees sought to impress others, but while they appeared on the outside to be righteous, on the inside they were full of hypocrisy and wickedness. While trying to be holy, they were ignoring the more important matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. If we are Old Testament Christians, we are simply the *new* Pharisees, exactly the kind of people Jesus did not want us to be.

So, there is a basis in the Old Testament for the beliefs of Old Testament Christians— that God is a God of war, that God rewards the faithful with material prosperity, and that it is better to be holy and exclusive than compassionate and inclusive. But those are not the only ideas one finds in the Old Testament, and they are ideas that are completely contrary to what Jesus taught us.

For that reason, I don’t think that Old Testament Christians are Christians at all. I don’t mean this as a personal judgment on such people. Old Testament Christians may be good people. They may be well-meaning, and they may have a strong faith in God. They are entitled to their beliefs, and they are entitled to our respect. But if they believe the opposite of what Jesus taught, it seems to me that *as a matter of definition*, they are not Christians. They are not trying to follow Jesus. They have not heard what he said. His teachings have not entered their hearts.

We understand the importance of the Old Testament. It makes up two-thirds of our Bibles. It is rich in stories, laws, poetry, proverbs, prophecy, and histories. It is also worth remembering that when Jesus and the apostles spoke of the scriptures, they were speaking of the Old Testament. The Old Testament helps us understand the background and context for the teachings of Jesus, as well as the writings of Peter and Paul, both of whom were Jewish before they were Christian.

But as Christians, we can't stop with the Old Testament. We continue on to the good news in the New Testament. The New Testament doesn't replace the Old Testament—it builds on it. The Old Testament is often referred to as “the law,” and Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.

Every exciting story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The end is usually the most satisfying and revealing part of the story, because it provides the climax. And the end of the story makes more sense after you have read the beginning and the middle.

That is the way I see the New Testament. It is the most satisfying and revealing part of the Bible, the climax, the ultimate revelation. And it makes more sense after studying the Old Testament—the beginning and the middle of the story. Rather than being Old Testament Christians, we should be *both* Old Testament *and* New Testament Christians.

When I think about Old Testament Christians, I feel sad about what they are missing. To put it simply, they are missing Jesus, and Jesus is just too good to miss!

Jesus came to announce the kingdom of God. He came to show us what it means to love God and each other. He showed us how to be nonviolent, and break through the never-ending cycle of war. He came to invite us into a new spiritual life. He came to announce good news to the poor, who were oppressed by the domination system that was run by the rich. He came to break through a ritual purity system that made most people unclean and cut them off from God. And he came for all of us, not just some of us. He welcomed everyone to the Lord's table. He came to share God's compassion with everyone.

We know it is hard to follow Jesus. But we must follow him if we are to truly know God and enter God's kingdom. We must follow him if we are to be spiritually liberated. We must follow him if we are to find salvation and eternal life. That is what he wishes for us, and that is what we should wish for each other.

Let us pray.

Lord, we rejoice that you are the God of love and peace and compassion. We rejoice at the spiritual riches that you offer each of us. We rejoice that we are all your children, and that we are all invited to your table. We thank you for your son, the Christ, who taught us these things, so that we might know you, and enter your kingdom, and be with you forever. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.