Out with the Old?

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The man was dressed smartly, with a neat haircut and a kind, open face. He spoke quickly, clearly, professionally. He was good; he knew how to preach to a crowd. But then he began flirting with heresy. Smiling, well-presented heresy.

It wasn't the ranting of some crazy, fringe-dwelling podcaster shouting into the wind tunnel of the Internet – it was a sermon from a very respected, well-loved, gospel-affirming church leader who carries significant influence. I watched all 39 minutes of it, and on the surface it sounded great – liberating, even – like a big sigh of relief. The correct response, however, would not be a relieved sigh but rather a shocked gasp.

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In his sermon, which was the final in a series of three, this pastor focused on the Old Testament, and his encouragement was that we all 'unhitch' it from the Christian faith. The foundation of the faith of the early church, he said, was not the Old Testament, because it didn't tell the story of Jesus. The Christian faith, he claimed, 'does not need propping up by the Jewish scriptures'. In

Acts 15, he went on, we have the definitive pattern of how to treat the Old Testament law, which is to get rid of it and only do things that promote peace between each other. 'Thou shalt not obey the Ten Commandments', he said, 'because those are not your commandments'.
Feel like gasping yet? He wasn't done.

'The old covenant, the law of Moses, was not the go-to source regarding sexual behavior in the church… In fact, the Old Testament was not the go-to source for any behavior in the church', he emphasised. 'Church leaders unhitched the church from the worldview, value system and regulations of the Jewish scriptures. Peter, James, Paul elected to unhitch the Christian faith from their Jewish scriptures, and, my friends, we must as well.'

> 'This God we have made.. we can understand him; because we have created him, he can never surprise us, never overwhelm us, nor astonish us, nor transcend us.'

If you're keeping score so far: the church in Acts told Gentile believers that they didn't need to observe the law of Moses to be Christians, so therefore we don't need the entire Old Testament. In this man's reasoning, and to actually paraphrase him, even if the creation account of Genesis is a myth, it doesn't matter. We have the eyewitness account of the resurrection and that's all we need.

Undermining The God of The Old Testament

This might sound ridiculous, but take a good look at this type of reasoning, because you're going to be seeing it a lot more. And as is the case most often, the problem is actually with God. The Old Testament is not being undermined – the God of the Old Testament is.

'The God of Abraham has withdrawn His conscious Presence from us, and another God whom our fathers knew not is making himself at home among us,' wrote A.W. Tozer, with remarkable insight. 'This God we have made, and because we have made him we can understand him; because we have created him, he can never surprise us, never overwhelm us, nor astonish us, nor transcend us.'

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Society has taken aim at just about every boundary God put in place for us, and now all that's left is to get rid of God Himself, bit by bit. And we're starting with the Old Testament. Find a

YouTube clip of an apologetics event at some campus, and during the Q&A section someone will inevitably stand up and say, 'How can I believe in the slave trading / child murdering / genocidal / warmongering / petulant God of the Old Testament?' Different setting, different person, same question. Every time. Society doesn't have an Old Testament problem – it has a God problem.

An Old Heresy

Of course, this is absolutely nothing new. Marcion of Sinope is described as an 'important figure in early Christianity', but for all the wrong reasons. Around the year 140 he attracted followers in Rome by teaching that Jesus is the Saviour sent by God (amen, brother!), Paul was an apostle (come on, preach it!) and that the wrathful God of the Old Testament is a separate and lower entity to the all-forgiving God of the New Testament (wait, what?). That's right, because Marcion didn't like the way He did things, he simply decided he was a different God. He simply couldn't believe that the God of wrath and justice is the same God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so he had to do something about it. He was opposed and excommunicated by the orthodox believers, and vigorously refuted by church fathers like Tertullian, but became one of the most successful heretics of the early church, gaining many disciples. Marcion may be long gone, but his way of thinking still lurks deep within the hearts of many, many people.

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Emotion Has Hijacked The Narrative

When it comes to our view of God, the battle should never be fought in the arena of emotion but on that of revealed truth. Today, emotion has hijacked the narrative of virtually every important conversation we need to have, while revealed truth stands in the corner, neglected and unexamined. If anyone will actually take the time to read the Old Testament, the God who reveals Himself in its pages is revealed as full of compassion and grace (in fact, those were the first words He used when revealing His glory to Moses in Exodus 34:6), mercy, kindness, patience and long-suffering. He is also revealed as holy, separate, able to burn with anger, ready to judge sin and ready to destroy His enemies. But what we find – and brace yourself: this is revolutionary – is that He is revealed in exactly the same way in the New Testament! Exactly the same. He didn't have some personality change or let His younger, nicer brother take the wheel. Jesus spoke of His own Father as the one we should fear – the One who 'has the power to throw you into hell' (Luke 12:5). Paul wrote that the 'wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness…' (Romans 1:18). God's character is exactly the same in the Old Testament and the New Testament; He's

perfectly consistent. Marcion had to have seen that. He just didn't like it.

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Let's go back to the influential pastor. The validity of some of his thoughts – we are not under Israel's law, for example – was lost in his unwillingness to separate Israel's ceremonial law, which has been fulfilled and no longer applies, from God's moral law, which will never change. He painted the entire Old Testament with one brush and then wrote 'IGNORE IT' across the whole thing. But when you ignore the entire Old Testament, even if you preach the resurrection of Jesus, you place yourself on the second floor of a building while instructing that the level below you be demolished by a wrecking ball. The death and resurrection of Jesus did not happen in a vacuum, as some are in the habit of trying to portray it. It involved God's grace towards humanity, but also His anger towards humanity's rebellion. The entire Bible charts and documents both God's perfect anger and judgment, as well as His deep love and mercy.

A 'Liberating' False Gospel

By the end of his preach, though, the pastor revealed his real motivation for going down this destructive road: it's for people who have a problem with the whole message of the Bible. The message he had just given, he explained, 'is liberating for men and women who were drawn to the simple message that God loves you so much He sent His son to pave the way to a relationship with you. It's appealing and it's liberating for people who need and understand grace… forgiveness… for people who find it virtually impossible to embrace the… worldview and the value system depicted in the story of ancient Israel.'

> Where is the sinfulness of man? Why did a way need to be paved?

And that's the problem: he has misrepresented the whole message of the whole Bible. The 'simple message' is not that God loves us so much that He sent His son to pave the way to a relationship with us. That is absolutely not the message. Where is the sinfulness of man? Why did a way need to be paved? Why did the relationship break down in the first place? The Bible (the entire Bible) tells us the entire message. We should not – and cannot, in truth – unhitch our faith from the Old Testament, because it involves exactly the same God.

Which God Are You Following?

When you start eliminating aspects of God because people might not like them, you are then worshipping people, not God. It's a huge mistake, and we should fight it with everything we have. In fact, the heresies of Marcion were one of the catalysts that forced the early church to take an even firmer stand for truth. May it be the same for us, even as the Christian world around us begins to whittle away what it doesn't like about the God revealed in the Bible.

> ..a God who is all mercy, but not just; a God who is all love, but not holy... He is not the God of the Bible'

To undermine the Old Testament is to undermine God. To be embarrassed of the Old Testament is to be embarrassed of God. To dislike and be offended by the Old Testament is to dislike and be offended by God. And to try to change it is to try and change God, and no one has been able to get that right. You can do it as neatly and as nicely as you want, but it's called heresy, and the true Church will not put up with it. It wasn't acceptable in the year 140 and it is still not acceptable today.

So I'll end with the words of English bishop J.C. Ryle, a man whose words we'd do well to take to heart: 'Beware of manufacturing a God of your own: a God who is all mercy, but not just; a God who is all love, but not holy... He is not the God of the Bible, and beside the God of the Bible there is no God at all.'