

No, Andy Stanley, We Should Not Unhitch Ourselves From the Old Testament

As followers of Jesus, should we “unhitch” ourselves from the Old Testament, as Pastor Andy Stanley recently claimed? God forbid. To do so is to make a grave mistake. It would be like “unhitching” our torsos from our legs. Or demolishing the first story of a house once the second story was completed.

Now, to be clear, Pastor Stanley has expressed his strong belief in the inspiration of the entire Bible. And he has preached lengthy series based on Old Testament books. And the purpose of his recent, controversial message is to reach those who have been turned off by religion, or who find it difficult to relate to certain Old Testament texts.

His message for them is simple: Start with Jesus! He came to introduce something totally new.

But in his zeal to reach the lost, he has dangerously overstated his case.

According to Pastor Stanley, “[First-century] 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.”

Actually, Peter, James (actually, Jacob) and Paul would be mortified by such claims.

Pastor Stanley even argued that, “Jesus’ new covenant, His covenant with the nations, His covenant with you, His covenant with us, can stand on its own two nail-scarred resurrection

feet. It does not need propping up by the Jewish Scriptures.”

This is so wrong on so many levels that it would take a whole book to refute. But here, at least, is a brief response. (Those wanting to dig deeper could start with Chapters 11 and 12 of my book *Hyper-Grace*.)

First, in Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus said that He did not come to abolish the Law or Prophets but to fulfill. In other words, He did not cancel, He confirmed (see Rom. 15:8-9). He did not remove the foundations; He strengthened the foundations. Accordingly, Paul wrote, “Do we then make the law void through faith? God forbid! Instead, we establish the law” (Rom. 3:31).

In stark contrast, Pastor Stanley interpreted Jesus to be saying, “I am in fact replacing. I’m not going to change what you’ve always been taught. I’m going to challenge you to abandon what you have been taught.”

Had Jesus done this, He would rightly have been rejected as a false prophet and false teacher and false Messiah.

Did He challenge His people to reject manmade traditions? Absolutely, many times. Did He challenge them to abandon wrong things they had learned about their sacred Scriptures? Without a doubt. Did He challenge them to abandon the sacred Scriptures themselves? Heaven forbid.

In his message, Pastor Stanley said that “the Law and the Prophets, the old covenant, had an expiration date.” But it is this imprecision that is so dangerous, since “the Old Covenant,” meaning the Sinai Covenant, did have an expiration date on it (see Jer. 31:31-34). The Law and the Prophets—the Jewish Scriptures—did not.

Second, contrary to Pastor Stanley’s claim that the early church leaders made it easier for Gentile converts by unhitching their faith from “the Jewish Scriptures,” the New Testament writers called Gentile believers to follow the moral

ethic of these very Scriptures.

Paul used Old Testament texts to warn the Corinthian believers to live holy lives, writing, "Now all these things happened to them [the Israelites] for examples. They are written as an admonition to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come (1 Cor. 10:1-11, citing v. 11 here; see also 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1, among many other passages). He also referenced the Ten Commandments when giving family instructions to the Ephesians (see Eph. 6:1-3).

What the early church leaders made clear in Acts 15 was that Gentile believers were not required to become Jews and take on the yoke of the Torah in order to be saved. They were not required to keep the dietary laws or the laws of ritual purity. And they were not to seek to be justified by the Law. As Peter explained, they, like the Jewish believers, were all saved by grace (Acts 15:7-11).

But throughout the New Testament, Gentiles believers were called to live holy lives, based on Old Testament teaching (see also 1 Pet. 1:13-17, quoting from Leviticus; it is possible that 1 Peter was written first for Jewish believers, but it was shared with the whole Body).

Third, Pastor Stanley claims that the early Jewish believers had "no sacred texts," a bizarre statement on every level. In fact, *the Bible* of the first believers, both Jewish and Gentile, was the Old Testament. You had better believe they had their sacred texts!

This is what Paul spoke of in 2 Timothy 3:16 when he stated that all Scripture was God-breathed. He was talking about what we call the Old Testament today. And this is what he spoke of in Romans 15:4, when he wrote, "For whatever was previously written was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

And this is what Jesus spoke of when He stated that “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35b). That’s also why He rebuked Satan using three verses from Deuteronomy (see Matt. 4). The Old Testament is the living, breathing, indispensable Word of God, and without it, the New Testament is propped up on thin air.

Fourth, Pastor Stanley is on very shaky ground when he alleges that, even if the Old Testament were untrue, all that matters is that Jesus rose from the dead. In his words, “Your whole house of Old Testament cards can come tumbling down. The question is did Jesus rise from the dead?”

Again, this is a staggeringly dangerous claim. If the Old Testament is not true, then there is no such thing as a Messiah, the God of Israel is a myth and the resurrection of Jesus has no context or meaning.

Pastor Stanley’s claim makes a mockery of Matthew’s opening words, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). It makes a mockery of Jesus’ words, when He said to His disciples after His resurrection, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and in the Prophets and in the Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44).

This claim makes a mockery of the entire New Testament, which constantly refers back to the Hebrew Scriptures. As I noted elsewhere, “some scholars claim that *almost one out of three* verses in the New Testament—2,500 out of a total of 8,000 verses—contains an Old Testament quote or general allusion, while, quite solidly, it can be demonstrated that ‘more than ten percent of the New Testament text is made up of citation or direct allusions to the Old Testament’” (Prof. Roger Nicole).

In fact, the Book of Revelation is so dependent on Old

Testament references and allusions that some commentators believe that about three-fourths of the book draws directly on the Old Testament, while others have shown that there are perhaps more references to the Hebrew Scriptures in Revelation than total verses in the book.

John the revelator, along with all the apostles, not to mention Jesus Himself, would have been astounded by Pastor Stanley's statements, regardless of how he tried to qualify them in his message and regardless of what how good his intentions may have been.

Fifth, Pastor Stanley states that the New Testament message is "liberating for people who need and understand grace, who need and understand forgiveness. And it's liberating for people who find it virtually impossible to embrace the dynamic, the worldview and the values system depicted in the story of Ancient Israel."

What He fails to acknowledge is that the Old Testament Scriptures also bring a glorious revelation of grace (read Ps. 103, for starters). They also give us the clearest theological statement about vicarious atonement anywhere in the Bible (I'm speaking of Isa. 53). It is anything but liberating to ignore verses like this. And the worldview of ancient Israel was, in many ways, the worldview of the apostles.

As for people today stumbling over Old Testament texts and Old Testament images of God, the fact is that, in the Sermon on the Mount alone, Jesus spoke of the punishment of hell fire more than all Old Testament writers combined. Is not hell the greater moral issue?

And in the book of Revelation, Jesus gave this warning to sinners in the church of Thyatira: "Look! I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will put her children to death, and all the churches shall know

that I am He who searches the hearts and minds. I will give to each one of you according to your deeds" (Rev. 2:22-23). Are not these disturbing as well?

And what of the Great White Throne judgment in Revelation 20:11-15? Might that upset some people today too?

Sixth, in his zeal to reach the unchurched and to recover those burned by traditional religion, Pastor Stanley forgets that the Old Testament also tells us the story of Israel, including Israel's blessed future. (For the record, the story of Israel was important for the Gentile converts as well; that's why Paul can freely reference the Passover in his writings; see 1 Cor. 5:7-8.)

Cut out the Old Testament, and you cut out much of Israel's destiny, which all believers should understand. Cut out the Old Testament, and you also cut out the destiny of the nations (see, for example, Isa. 2:1-4 and Acts 3:17-21).

And, to be frank, once you yield to the critics on the authority and relevance and inspiration of the Old Testament, you will find yourself yielding to them on the authority and relevance and inspiration of the New Testament.

Back in the days of the heretic Marcion in the second century, the church had to reject calls to sever itself from its Old Testament roots. (Marcion, to be clear, was far more extreme in his beliefs than Pastor Stanley.) Yet this heresy has risen again in different forms over time, some more severe than others. (At one point, Nazi theologians actually rewrote the New Testament to disconnect it from its Jewish roots.)

A pastor as influential as Andy Stanley needs to distance himself from such heresies, making a public, clear and unequivocal correction that undoes the confusion he has caused. (He knows that I write this a friend, out to help, not to hurt.)

He can preach against legalism and against Judaizing, exalting the grace of God and celebrating the newness of the New Covenant, without undermining the very foundations on which that New Covenant is established. I will wholeheartedly join him in that, just as I wholeheartedly urge him to bring correction to his recent comments.

(I sent Pastor Stanley an advance copy of this article for review before posting. He expressed his appreciation for me sending it to him, felt that in reality, we are not that far apart, but said that he stood by his comments, in context. And he strongly encouraged those who have concerns to listen to his entire, relevant series, since he crafts his series as other leaders craft individual messages.)