

Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics

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Introduction

I have found that many Christians have as their first or main question to put to any passage of the Bible, “What does it tell us about ourselves?” They might sometimes start with, “What does it tell us about God?” But that soon takes second place to the more self-indulgent questions. This may, of course, be generated by a commendable conviction that the Scriptures are practical, and by a desire to live lives that are pleasing to God. Or it may be a habit born from the correct perception that the Scriptures are indeed God’s way of teaching us about ourselves. But the perspective or main focus is back-to-front. Such an approach usually fails to ask exactly how it is that God uses Scripture to teach us about ourselves. Is it by law or by gospel? When Jesus referred to the Scriptures of the Old Testament he said of Moses, “he wrote about me.” He said of the Scriptures as a whole, “they testify of me.”¹ His main concern was to show the disciples the things concerning himself (Luke 24:25-27, 44), so that his emphasis was that the Scriptures are first and foremost about him. And this emphasis is linked with Jesus opening their minds to understand the Scriptures (v. 45). Why is our emphasis often so different?

It needs to be said at the outset that the Bible does indeed tell us a lot about ourselves. In fact, it is the only reality check that is available to us in ultimate terms. The hermeneutic question for us all, however, is “how does it speak of us and how do we receive instruction for living from it?” When Paul wrote to Timothy saying,

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work,” (2 Tim 3:16-17) he pointed to the pastoral-doctrinal significance of Scripture. But behind this statement is Paul’s whole understanding of the role of Jesus Christ as the mediator of salvation, a principle he expresses in 1 Tim 2:5, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”²

Put simply, the issue is one of how we read Scripture as the means of knowing what is in life and how we should seek to live it. The hermeneutic problem lies in the gap between the modern Christian and the ancient text. This is especially obvious when we deal with Old Testament texts, but the New Testament also presents itself as a collection of ancient texts with a whole set of dynamics that are not part of our experience. In this article I want to explore some of the ways that the discipline of biblical theology can help us to cross the gap and to read any part of Scripture as God’s word to us.

Theological and Philosophical Hermeneutics *The Differences*

We can distinguish between the fact that biblical hermeneutics in the church from time to time was influenced by alien philosophical ideas, and the more recent secular development of hermeneutical philosophy which asks about meaning and understanding in general. Perhaps it

would be more accurate to say that they lie on a continuum but a long way apart. The world of Jesus and the apostles was one that was full of different religions and philosophies. It was multi-cultural and diverse. All kinds of alien ideas clamored for acceptance, and it is not surprising that the sub-apostolic age saw the growing influence of many of these ideas on the thinking of some Christian leaders and writers. There remained, however, the overwhelming sense that God has spoken through the apostolic message and through the Hebrew Scriptures. Despite the influences of Greek philosophy and of various gnostic sects, reverence for the written word of God remained the approach to the Bible through the medieval church, the Reformation, and right up to the time of the Enlightenment.

With thinkers like Decartes and Spinoza the process gained momentum which led to more and more philosophical influences intruding into western thinking and, thus, into hermeneutics so that the governing presuppositions of Christian Theism were weakened and finally eliminated. This, of course, was not a universal phenomenon as many Christians pressed on with devotion to the principles of the Reformation and, through them, to those of the apostles. But the reach of the Enlightenment was considerable as Schleiermacher's liberalism paved the way to Heidegger and his existentialist successors. The transition from a sense of the objective authority of the transcendent God through his word to an acceptance of pure subjectivity and immanence was climaxed by the multi-faceted phenomenon of postmodernism. The road to hermeneutical atheism was complete.

If there is any one main difference

between the apostolic hermeneutics and those of the modern and postmodern world, it perhaps lies in the inability of the latter to adequately relate transcendence to immanence, and objectivity to subjectivity. It is our contention, then, that Christian Theism, with its Christocentric emphasis and its doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, and creation *ex nihilo*, provides the only real antidote to this malaise.

The Similarities

In both theological and philosophical hermeneutics there is the attempt to give a view of reality that is universal. Hermeneutics is governed by our worldview, and consequently the way we interpret the world, including the texts of the Bible, will reveal what our understanding of reality is. Any view of reality will contain, either implicitly or explicitly, a measure of self-understanding. This may differ somewhat from what we profess our understanding to be, or even what we think quite sincerely that it is. Only when we begin to look at both our starting point and the practical outcome of our analysis of text or experience will we be able to assess with any accuracy what we really do understand the world of our experience to be. Both theological and philosophical hermeneutics are expressive of world-views. Both involve presuppositions and, if done with integrity, both will involve a hermeneutical spiral that seeks refinements and corrections to the starting point and to the outcomes.

It is my purpose in this article to propose that the discipline of biblical theology, when carried out with consistently Christian presuppositions, is an essential though much neglected aspect of the way we as Christians come to a

sound biblically based worldview. Biblical theology is essential to the proper understanding of the Bible. I stress the need for sound presuppositions since they provide the first questions that we put to the text of Scripture. We may indeed learn much from people who have very different presuppositions from our own. Biblical hermeneutics may overlap with philosophical hermeneutics. Our biblical theology may overlap with that of those who do not share our kind of Christian Theism. But any authentic similarities will exist because of common grace and the image of God that remains in all people. Inauthentic similarities only serve to show the ongoing relevance of Paul's warning: "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition" (Col 2:8). Christians should always be aware of the seductive powers of unbiblical notions, especially in the realm of academia.

The Fortunes of Biblical Theology ***The Demise***

The demise of biblical theology probably began with the Enlightenment and its influence on biblical studies so that biblical theology mutated into a study of the history of ancient religions. The American biblical theology movement of the mid-twentieth century failed to the point that it could not fulfill its purpose to provide a way out of the impasse between liberalism and fundamentalism.³ It simply did not come to terms with the orthodox understanding of the inspiration and authority of the Bible. One issue was revelation. The weakening of the belief in the inspiration of the Bible led to the notion that historical events constituted revelation while the written word was merely the pious reflection on historical events. Neo-orthodoxy

separated Scripture from the word of God while orthodoxy continued to maintain their unity *and* their distinction. Neo-orthodoxy and liberalism appealed to those who shied away from the idea of propositional revelation. The idea that God could or would speak so as to be understood, that is, that he would reveal truth through words with propositional force, was simply ruled out.

As more and more radical approaches to Scripture and especially to its historical truth-claims gained ground, so the sense of a divinely breathed and reliable record of the history of salvation receded. Some devotees of salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*) drew a line of separation between the events that really happened (*Historie*) and the "faith" statements about what happened (*Geschichte*). The application of a historical-critical method, that was formed on naturalistic presuppositions, fuelled the periodic attempts to unearth the "historical Jesus" who had almost no similarity to the Jesus of the New Testament.

Among evangelicals⁴ at least two emphases have undermined the role of biblical theology. The one is a subjective focus on experience and the immediacy of the application of the biblical texts. This is not bad in itself if it is controlled by a sound hermeneutical approach, about which I shall have more to say. But when it is uncontrolled it can lead to the kind of subjectivism that loses interest in what the text actually means in favor of "how it speaks to me."

The other emphasis that can undermine biblical theology is a preoccupation with sound doctrine which, by definition, is also not a bad thing in itself. Yet, historically, what was perceived to be a dead doctrinal orthodoxy has not bred an

interest in biblical theology but rather a reactive neglect of doctrine in many situations. Doctrine for doctrine's sake can be a dead hand upon a Christian community. Purist splinter-denominations that expel members for any small detail of perceived heterodoxy have always been one of the less attractive parts of the Christian scene. We need sound doctrine, but we also need biblical theology. Unfortunately they have often become separated both in the academy and the congregation.⁵ What both subjectivism and doctrinal perfectionism have in common is the potential to remove the biblical text from its historical and biblical theological contexts. These are often set in opposition with great vigour by the protagonists of each so that a book, a sermon, or a Bible study is said to be either devotional *or* doctrinal, but never both. It is thought that it simply is not possible to bring the two together. I am going to be arguing below that the antidote to these distortions of good things is the recourse to biblical theology.

The Survival

Despite the challenges, Reformation biblical studies survived. Continental Pietism and English Puritanism were two key movements in keeping orthodox Christian Theism alive in the face of the Enlightenment.⁶ The Evangelical Revival in England ensured that by the nineteenth century there were still those in mainstream Protestant churches that held to the major principles of the Reformation. Out of this situation in Europe, Britain, and America, a vigorous evangelical biblical theology emerged in the twentieth century. It then spread to other parts of the world, notably Australia.

The defining of biblical theology in formal terms as a distinct discipline prob-

ably began in earnest in the nineteenth century. There were earlier movers in this direction in the eighteenth century, notably Johann Philipp Gabler. Gabler's inaugural address at Altdorf in 1787 is commonly regarded as a defining moment in that he made a pioneering statement distinguishing biblical from systematic theology.⁷ But he was a child of the Enlightenment and his understanding of biblical theology was very different from what would emerge from conservatives with a high view of Scripture. Indeed, Gabler seemed more concerned to rescue dogmatics from philosophy than to establish a fruitful biblical theology.

Of course much depends on how we define what we mean by biblical theology. This in turn will depend on what presuppositions we bring to the task. This is especially true of what we believe the unity of the Bible to mean. Some modern biblical theologians find it convenient to speak of theologies of the Bible rather than of a single theology. But the heirs of the Reformation in modern evangelicalism do not understand the unity of the Bible to be primarily a matter of empirical investigation that is driven by many different presuppositional starting points. One implication of the centrality of Christ to the whole of Scripture is that the unity of Scripture is first and foremost an article of faith.

It is interesting that quite a bit of cross-fertilization has taken place between evangelicals and some whom we might regard as somewhat left of center theologically. Indeed the man who set me on fire (metaphorically speaking!) for biblical theology was a staunch conservative evangelical, Donald Robinson, my Old Testament lecturer when as a student at Moore College in Sydney I wrestled

with the questions of how the whole Bible could be construed as a unity. His simple description, in response to another student's question, of how revelation was structured quite blew my mind.⁸ Many years later, at a School of Theology at Moore College, Robinson described how certain scholars, none of them evangelical, had led him in the direction of biblical theology.⁹

Defining Biblical Theology

Biblical theology is commonly acknowledged to be that process of understanding theology as the Bible itself presents it before ever we engage in dogmatic formulations. That, in itself, raises important questions. If we go to the text of Scripture seeking its theology we have already made certain assumptions about the nature of the Bible. We have, in fact, started with a preformed dogma that could have risen in any of a number of ways.¹⁰ Any biblical theology involves two distinguishable processes. The first is what is sometimes referred to as a synchronic approach. This involves the analytical examination of the parts of the whole and includes exegesis or a close reading of the parts of the biblical canon. It is synchronic in that it examines the texts relating to one period of time. Studies in the theology of a prophet, of a single book, or of one period in Israel's history are synchronic. However, the unity of the Bible reminds us that no exegetical task is complete until we have related a specific text to the overall message of Scripture. Thus, synchronic analysis requires that we also engage in diachronic synthesis. This recognizes both the unity of Scripture and the progressive nature of revelation. In my view, while there is always a need for focused studies of designated areas, the synthesis of the diachronic bib-

lical theology is what gives coherence to the Bible by seeking to understand what kind of overall unity exists.

Doubting the Viability of Biblical Theology

Among the contributors to the modern debates about biblical theology are those who doubt its viability. They do this for a number of reasons. I will suggest three that are all related. The first is the challenge to the notion of the unity of the Bible. This can take a number of forms. Diversity in the Scriptures is pressed home to mean a lack of unity. This is contrary to Christian Theism, which accepts the New Testament evidence for the conviction of Jesus and the apostles that the Old Testament, despite its diversity, is a unified account of the acts of God interpreted by the prophetic word of God. The Scriptures ultimately stem from the single authorship of the Holy Spirit. That they, by the Spirit, testify to Jesus means that there is an essential unity since Christ is not divided. The question, "What do you think of the Christ, whose son is he?" thus implies a further question, "What do you think of the Scriptures; whose words are they?"

Second, some are challenged by the naturalistic assumptions of the historical critical method to question the integrity of the narrative of biblical history. The traditional convictions of both church and synagogue that the story line of the Bible is credible and accurate are dismissed. The historical question is crucial given the biblical emphasis on God acting and speaking within human history for our salvation.¹¹ Of course there are questions of how ancient historians wrote and we soon learn that it is a mistake to try to impose the rules of modern historiogra-

phy onto the narratives.

This latter question points to the third stumbling block to many scholars' liking for biblical theology. If the Bible is not of divine origin but simply an anthology of religious writings put together over some fifteen hundred years or so, then the idea of a unified biblical theology evaporates. The Scriptures are simply scriptures that record the religious conviction of a range of ancient people. The notions of God speaking, and of his Holy Spirit ensuring that what the Scriptures say is what God says, are ruled out.

***Evangelical Presuppositions:
The Dogmatic Basis of
Biblical Theology***

Any reader of the Bible comes with certain presuppositions. The unbelieving reader whose approach is one of assumed neutrality, or even owned hostility, will either stifle the witness of Scripture or be changed by it. In other words, a hermeneutic spiral either is allowed to operate or it is not. If it does operate, then every reading of Scripture will cause the careful reader to reconsider the presuppositions originally brought to the text. If it is thought necessary, certain changes will be made so that any further reading will involve new assumptions and new questions.

The evangelical presuppositions that are brought to the text are doctrinal. Some theologians may be prejudiced in such a way as to operate with minimal reference to the Bible. But the evangelical dogmatist will assert that biblical theology provides the raw material for doctrinal formulation. However, some early biblical theologians were so driven by doctrinal orthodoxy that they were little more than a collection of proof-texts

for systematics. On the other hand, some biblical theologians will imply that doing biblical theology removes the need for doctrinal formulations.

The consistent evangelical position is that we need both biblical theology and systematic (dogmatic) theology, and that they interact. The reflective evangelical biblical theologian will recognize that dogmatic presuppositions are brought to the task as soon as we start to question Scripture whether for its literary qualities, its historical records, or its theological teaching. When we ask theological questions we must face the questions of the authority of Scripture, its unity, and its primary focus. A Christian comes with different presuppositions from those of the humanist or even the religious Jew. The consistent position is that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the means by which God converts us and brings us to adopt Christian presuppositions about any aspect of reality. Thus, there is an important sense in which we begin with Christ and end with him. He is the hermeneutical Alpha and Omega.

The nature of the gospel is such that it demands of the converted enquirer of Scripture a number of things. Allegiance to Jesus Christ means obedience to his word. The combined testimony of the four Gospels and of the apostolic witness in the rest of the New Testament provides us with our dogmatic assumptions towards Scripture. If we can for a brief time put aside any bad habits learned from our sub-cultural upbringing in evangelical churches and homes, and allow the gospel to dictate them, we will recognize certain things that are required of us. The circularity of this approach is a characteristic of any approach. There is no neutral objectivity. Our defense against vicious

circularity is an understanding of the hermeneutical spiral and the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Our hermeneutics must be gospel-driven.

First, the gospel demands of us that we see that the whole Bible is about Christ simply because he says so and not because it is immediately obvious to us. Second, we will need to come to terms with the kinds of structures within that unity that are evident from the way the New Testament uses the Old Testament. Third, we will approach the Old Testament as a structured Christian corpus and ask how it testifies to Jesus seeing that it is written about events that took place before his advent.¹² Such questions as these are essential to sound hermeneutics, but they cannot be adequately answered without engaging in biblical theology.

The Role of Biblical Theology in Biblical Interpretation ***The Neglect of Biblical Theology in Hermeneutics***

When one examines the standard texts on hermeneutics, including those written by evangelicals, one may well wonder whether biblical theology has had any significant role in hermeneutics at all. There are some notable exceptions, but it nevertheless is generally true that biblical theology is more or less assumed or ignored. This is a situation that I, as a biblical theologian who also teaches a course in evangelical hermeneutics, find somewhat perplexing. My own experience is that when Christian people, both trained and untrained theologians, acquire some sense of the value of biblical theology they tend to become enthusiasts. One obvious reason for this is simply the sense of the “big picture” and the tangible unity of Scripture that it engenders. To discover

that the Bible is far from being a collection of unconnected stories and teachings is a liberating experience.

On the other hand we must ask why scholars of hermeneutics seem often unimpressed by biblical theology. That this is so among those we loosely refer to as liberals is not to be wondered at. I maintain that biblical theology requires a high view of Scripture, of its authority and its unity, to remain viable. Enlightenment thinking inevitably reduces the value of Scripture on all fronts. A fragmented Bible, or one that has been downgraded to the status of an anthology of ancient religious ideas, requires an altogether different hermeneutical strategy from that demanded by the word of God written.

I have already referred above to the evangelical neglect of biblical theology and some possible causes. Specifically I nominated evangelical subjectivism and rigid doctrinal orthodoxy. The former is, I believe, the most prevalent cause of the ignorance of biblical theology among evangelicals. Subjectivism is a characteristic that is a natural tendency of the human heart. Biblical dogmatics, and specifically the doctrines of creation and the incarnation are essential to a proper understanding of the relationship of subjectivity and objectivity. The Enlightenment catapulted subjectivism into the foreground while it undermined the possibility of a true objectivity. Decartes’ doubting of anything beyond *cogito ergo sum*, Schleiermacher’s reduction of God to the intuition of what I feel, and Bultmann’s preoccupation with self-understanding, have all taken their toll and find correspondences in the individualism and subjectivism that has affected evangelicalism at least since the nineteenth century.¹³

Prior to the Enlightenment, Roman

Catholic theology had long since internalized the gospel with its doctrine of infused grace. Rome's upside-down gospel included the refusal to allow the historical once-for-all events of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ to remain objective, albeit with subjective implications. Rome's Thomist foundations and the Enlightenment coincide on a number of issues including the softening of the effects of sin and the preservation of a natural ability to know reality without the special revelation of the Bible and without the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

An evangelical adaptation of Catholicism emerges when the gospel is seen primarily as God acting within the believer. "Jesus-in-my-heart" theology and a primary focus on the gospel of the changed life is evangelical Catholicism.¹⁵ Evangelical Schleiermacherism is seen in the religion of feeling and experience that governs how we understand the biblical text. Evangelical Bultmannism is found when the essence of preaching the gospel is to call people to "decide for Christ" often without any clear exposition of the objective historical facts of who or what this Christ is. The gospel demands decision, but it is not itself merely the call to decide.

One other fairly diverse area of neglect of biblical theology for hermeneutics arises out of the separation of the two Testaments. From the time the writing of biblical theologies began in earnest in the nineteenth century, very few theologies of the whole Bible have appeared.¹⁶ We have either an Old Testament Theology or a New Testament Theology. Often this simply reflects the specialties of the authors. For some it is statement of the lack of real connection between the Testaments. For others it is a pragmatic decision given that

the Bible is a very big book.

The Structure of Biblical Revelation

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). This can easily be read as meaning that the Old Testament is an anthropocentric book of rules. But we need to observe how Paul uses the Old Testament in order to instruct his readers. In v. 15 he indicates that the same Scriptures are able to make one wise to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. For Paul, the Old Testament Scriptures are Christocentric.

If the Old Testament is somehow Christocentric, then it follows that the Bible is structured typologically. Yet there remains a deep suspicion of typology, partly because there have been some real excesses proposed in the name of typology. Typology is often confused with allegory, which gives it a bad name. So, let us start by looking at some of the ways that the New Testament presents its relation to the Old Testament. The four Gospels each have a unique way of making the link at the outset. Thus Matthew gives us his schematized genealogy of Jesus linking him with Abraham, David, and the exile. It is clear that Matthew is interested in the theological significance of these defining points. He introduces Jesus as son of Abraham and son of David. And, through Matthew's theology of the cross, Jesus is shown to be related to the real spiritual exile. Matthew is also concerned to show that Jesus does or says things "that the Scriptures might be fulfilled."

Mark brings us immediately to the beginning of Jesus' ministry of preaching,

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.” (Mark 1:15). The implication is that the whole process revealed in the Old Testament has reached a crisis point of fulfillment. Luke begins with a birth narrative that links the coming of Jesus to the temple and to the fulfillment of Old Testament promises. John has a more cosmic perspective as he locates the one who is the Word come in the flesh as the creator Word from the beginning.

Space does not permit much detail here, but we can at least observe some of the more obvious features of the New Testament’s use of the Old. In this relationship of the ministry of Jesus to its antecedents in the events of the Old Testament there are some important emphases to be observed. It is clear that Jesus is seen as having an important theological link to both Abraham and David. It becomes apparent that Jesus and the apostles regarded Abraham as the father of God’s people, and David as the pinnacle of this people. The exile is a reminder that from the heights of David’s kingdom there came a great and disastrous fall that began in earnest with Solomon. Thus, Peter in his Pentecost sermon focuses on David’s testimony to the Christ, who is Jesus. Paul, in his first recorded sermon (Acts 13), recounts a biblical theology that has three chief moments: the election of the fathers, David, and David’s descendant Jesus.

These emphases alone should cause us to ask about the way the Old Testament itself deals with such matters. I will now outline what seems to me to be the clear structure of biblical revelation. Again space does not permit me to go into as much detail as I would like.¹⁷

1. Creation, Fall, and the Grace of God

Genesis 1-11 is both the theological preamble to the calling of Abraham, and to the whole Bible. God creates; mankind rebels; God judges but at the same time exercises grace in a covenantal way. Creation and the human race, despite the heinous rebellion against the Creator, still have a future.

2. Redemptive History Involving Abraham and His Descendants

The calling of Abraham gives specificity to the expressions of grace and covenant in Gen 1-11. The story unfolds with numerous dynamics relating to the way God deals with sinners by grace alone. Promise without any immediate fulfillment leads to a captivity without an immediately obvious spiritual cause. Redemption is revealed in the exodus, and the redeemed life structured by the law of Moses. The history of Israel unfolds as that of a wayward people who are incapable of unambiguous obedience. Yet God graciously leads them into the promised land and establishes them under a monarchy intended to reflect the rule of God. The pinnacle of this process that began with the covenant promises to Abraham is reached in David. To him an enduring promise is made of a descendant to possess the throne of God’s rule.

That Solomon, David’s son, wise man, temple builder, and the designated son of God (2 Sam 7:14), is all but ignored in the New Testament can be explained by two factors. First, the emphasis is always on David as the recipient of the promises, so the true king is known as David’s son, not Solomon’s. Second, Solomon is a very ambiguous figure. His achievements in wisdom and in building the temple are

squandered in his apostasy and the consequent destruction of Israel. The significance of both wisdom and the temple as fulfillments of David's ministry remains, but Solomon fades from view. It seems to me indisputable that David, along with the first part of Solomon's kingship, represents a high point in redemptive revelation. Between Abraham and David the entire structure of salvation and kingdom life is given its preliminary, that is, its typological expression.

3. Decline, Exile, and Eschatological Hope

From Solomon's apostasy onward it is all downhill except for a few brief attempts at reform. The depths are reached in the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. During the decline and the exile a new breed of prophets arise who have something distinct to say. The so-called writing prophets all engage in accusations of covenant-breaking and threats of divine retribution. Their unique role is to introduce a wholly new set of promises of gracious restitution and salvation. The significant thing is that the newness of their message involves taking the old structures that belong to Israel's experiences from Abraham to David, and projecting them into a future, kingdom of God. These old structures are given new life in that they are transformed into a future that is perfect, glorious, and eternal. Yet any apparent fulfillments of such promises recorded in the Old Testament are but pale reflections of the promises. The nation restored under Cyrus, with its rebuilt temple and structures of autonomous rule, is a disappointing shadow of the expectations. The Old Testament ends with hope but no real substance to the fulfillments.

4. The Unexpected Manner of Fulfillment in Christ

The New Testament proclaims that what God has promised in the Old Testament is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus. Again it is notable that the Old Testament structures are recapitulated in these fulfillments. It is, I believe, clear that Jesus, the apostles and the New Testament authors all saw the categories of Old Testament promise given their true expression and meaning in Christ. In other words the Day of the Lord arrived with the first coming of Jesus. The end of the ages came upon us in that event (1 Cor 10:11).

5. Synthesis

Biblical revelation first consists of a preparatory and pattern-making section in Gen 1-11. Second, the kingdom of God and the nature of redemption are revealed within the historical processes from Abraham to David. Third, the period of the writing prophets embraces an historical demonstration of the wrath of God in judgment, and the reiteration of the word of grace promising eventual and perfect fulfillment of the promises of the kingdom of God. Fourth, these promises are declared to be fulfilled in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, against the background of the fall and intermittent judgments, biblical revelation consists of a typological-historical epoch (primarily from Abraham to David and Solomon), a strand of recapitulation of the type (prophetic eschatology), and the antitype (Jesus Christ).

The Biblical "Big Picture" of Reality

Alongside the analysis just given we must consider how it is that Jesus is the

fulfiller. The Bible gives a comprehensive worldview or, more accurately, a view of reality. Nothing that exists is outside of this big picture of reality. Most simply stated, reality consists of God and the creation. Unlike the dogmas of evolutionary faith, the Bible presents mankind as having both continuity with the rest of creation (made from the dust and, like the animals, is *nephesh hayyah*), and discontinuity (alone made in God's image). The relationships established in creation involve the absolute lordship of God and a reflected dominion exercised by man over the rest of creation.

The rebellion of mankind against God and the consequent judgment disrupt all the relationships of almost everything to everything else. Relationships not spoiled by sin would be those within the Trinity and the angels. While the redemptive history takes place in divinely ordained contexts of the history of the people of God, it bespeaks of a promise to bring God, mankind and the world of nature into right relationships. How is this done? The Old Testament gives many clues but never enough for us to get the whole picture. Only when the incarnate Son of God comes can we really understand the process.

The incarnation confronts us with the difficulty of accommodating a human being who is also God. Christian heresies tried to rationalize this by diluting the truth. Jesus was only human with the biggest of all divine sparks (Ebionism). Jesus was divine spirit who only appeared to have a human form (Docetism). Jesus was human except that he had a divine, but not a human, spirit (Apollinarianism). And so on. But in Christian orthodoxy the confession has remained that the incomprehensible exists: a being who is

both fully God and fully human.

When the New Testament reflects on what God has done in Christ we may easily miss the implication of what is being said. The Bible indicates that reality consists of God, humanity, and the rest of the created universe. The incarnation means that Jesus is representative reality. He is true God and true human being. As a human being he shares our created being of flesh and blood. Thus God, humanity, and "dust," exist together in perfect relationships in the person of Christ. This is a foretaste of what God is achieving through him. He *is* the kingdom, the regeneration. Thus, by faith Christians partake of the perfection of Jesus' manhood and, in him, are regenerate sons of God.

We can see this reality picture reflected in certain descriptions of Christ:¹⁸

- Acts 13:32-33: The resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, which include those relating to the renewal of all things.
- Rom 8:19-23: The work of Christ effects the redemption of the whole of creation.
- I Cor 1-2: Christ in his gospel is the wisdom of God, which links him to the Old Testament perspective on God's wisdom in the order of creation.
- 2 Cor 1:20: All God's promises, which must include those of a new creation, are affirmed in Christ.
- 2 Cor 5:17: Christ *is* the locus of the new creation.¹⁹
- Eph 1:10: God's plan is, in the fullness of time, to sum up *all* things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. As with Gal 4:4, the fullness of time is the time of the gospel event, not the second coming. Thus, the incarnation is the summing-up event of all reality.
- Eph 2:13-22: Christ as the new temple fulfils all the expectations of the new temple in the Old Testament, which is closely related to the renewal of the earth; the new temple in Ezekiel is the centre of the

new Eden.

- Col 1:15-20: Christ is the reason for the creation and is the firstborn of all creation. All things hold together in him. He reconciles the whole of the created order to God.

- Col 2:2-3: Christ contains all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

- 1 Pet 3:1-13: Christians wait for the new heavens and the new earth to be revealed at the coming of Christ.

- Rev 21-22: the goal of the biblical story is the new heavens and the new earth; the final rule of God and his Christ.

It follows that the first coming of Christ fulfilled all, I repeat, *all* the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament since these all deal in some way or other with the restoration of reality.

The Biblical “Big Picture” of Redemption in Christ

This big picture of redemptive history finding its complete fulfillment in the first coming of Christ naturally raises certain questions. For many scholars, and in some popular opinion, only part of the body of prophecy is thus fulfilled. The remainder points to the second coming. This is not at all clear to me. For one thing the Old Testament focuses on one Day of the Lord, one coming of the Messiah, one event of setting up the kingdom of God. Is it possible, then, to distinguish between promises of the first coming and promises of the second? The obvious answer is that Jesus and the New Testament writers must guide us.

When we follow up the New Testament view of things the perspective of the “now” and the “not yet” comes into focus. But what is the relationship of what is *now* and what is *not yet*? There are too many places where prophecies that look like the consummation are applied to the gospel

age; too many references to the last days or the end of the ages being now; and too many references to the rule of Christ now. On the other hand, there are those references to salvation, to the end, to the last days that are yet to come. How are we to resolve this apparent double vision? The answer is in the coming of the Christ.

The New Testament differentiates where the Old Testament does not. Jesus the Messiah *has come* in the flesh, he *is coming* now by his Holy Spirit, and *he will come* in glory at the consummation of all things. The first event was the end come (representatively) in him. The second (beginning with Pentecost) is the end coming among God’s people through the gospel and the Spirit. The third (the return of Christ) will be the end coming as consummation to the whole of creation. While there are real distinctions there is also a real sameness. In each case it is the whole end promised in the Old Testament. Not a third plus a third plus a third, but the whole plus the whole plus the whole. The distinctions lie in *how* the whole end comes.

Now, it is this perspective that structures Christian existence. Our union with Christ means that we have already died, risen, and ascended to sit with Christ in heavenly places. Our union with Christ means that we go on striving in the present to put to death what is earthly within us, and that we seek to live as those risen with Christ who are already citizens of heaven. Our union with Christ and his resurrection means that we look forward with confidence to the glory that is yet to be revealed. These, respectively, are the perspectives of justification, sanctification, and glorification.

The Hermeneutic Application of Biblical Theology

A person who is dead towards God and a rebellious suppressor of the truth interprets all data as evidence against God. The sovereign grace of God, operating through the Holy Spirit as he brings the sinner to new birth and faith in the gospel, renews the mind. All data are now seen as God's. God's hermeneutical norm for reality is Jesus Christ in his gospel. The interpretation of reality; of the world, of history, of human nature, is governed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Hermeneutical sanctification is the progressive application of the truth as it is revealed in him to the world of our experience. It begins with our interpretation of God's word written.

The role of biblical theology is to provide us with a biblical perspective on the Bible itself. Ideally, biblical theology involves our submission to God as he speaks through his Christ. This word of God comes to us now only in Scripture. Biblical theology involves us in a dialogue between our exegesis and our dogmatic formulations. Our encounter with the risen Christ in conversion programs us with a doctrine of the authority of God's word. The historic nature of the gospel event and the Old Testament's unfolding of its antecedents demand the undertaking of biblical theology. This undertaking in turn enables us to build more accurately and more comprehensively our dogmatic presuppositions to the task.

While hermeneutics will require attention to other disciplines such as the study of the biblical languages, linguistic theory, literary criticism, biblical historiography, and even philosophy, none of these will bring us to an authentic worldview or self-understanding without the biblical

worldview as it is uncovered by biblical theology. In fact biblical theology implies the use of every exegetical means available to come to an understanding of the text.²⁰ Exegesis in canonical context is necessary if we are to see past the diversity of the biblical documents to the unity of the canon that centers on Christ. Without this we will have a distorted view of reality. When Christ is removed from his historical context he easily becomes merely an ideal. The biblical narratives are reduced to timeless sources of morality. Inevitably the locus of salvation shifts from the objective reality of the finished work of the risen and ascended Christ to the subjective perceptions of individual piety and infused grace. Hermeneutics becomes a matter of subjective preference based on subjective criteria. An internally wrought salvation returns us to the middle ages and the consequent loss of assurance. Subjectivity becomes subjectivism because it has lost its necessary link to the objective out-there-ness of a transcendent God who defines immanence by the historic Jesus coming to us. Evangelicalism deteriorates to become modern, maybe even postmodern, and loses its basis in revelation and reality.

Conclusion

If I am right about the necessity for biblical theology, then it follows that it belongs to all God's people, not merely to pastors and teachers. Yet this is a most neglected area. Biblical theology belongs in preaching, teaching, and in all levels of Christian education. As soon as Christian children are old enough to grasp the sense of narrative we should begin teaching them the "big picture" of the biblical story.²¹ Yet how many of our youth and adults, let alone the children,

have any real sense of the way the whole Bible hangs together? Do our preachers really grasp the need to show the fruits of biblical theology in the way they preach? The only way to do this is to major on expository preaching, and in such a way that the sense of the unity of the Bible is built up. Above all, Old Testament preaching should be undertaken in a way that shows how the whole Bible testifies to Christ. Narrative should be milked first and foremost for its part in redemptive history rather than for its exemplary morals. This takes careful and time-consuming preparation.

None of these things will happen in any significant way in churches and Christian homes if it does not start in the evangelical academies and seminaries. How many such establishments actually include a compulsory course in biblical theology? (A pass in “Biblical Theology 101” should be a prerequisite for anyone who is undertaking any kind of Bible ministry.) How many such establishments encourage its biblical studies professors to dialogue with its theologians about the need they have for each other? How many such places of learning teach hermeneutics with a view to encouraging preaching and teaching that proclaims the Christ of the whole Bible rather than some pale reflection of him? The seminary, as much as the church as a whole, needs to remember the Reformation dictum: The reformed church is always reforming.

ENDNOTES

¹John 5:46; 5:39.

²The context of this statement is not the one we are immediately concerned with, but the principle is there and is either universally true or it is not true at all.

³Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology*

in Crisis (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

⁴I am aware that there are some differences in the way the term *evangelical* is used in the USA from its usage in Britain and Australia. For me it describes the consistent application of the theology of the Reformation. While it may embrace fundamentalists and dispensationalists, it is wider than that. For me, the most consistent expression of evangelicalism is Reformed theology.

⁵A matter lamented, amongst others, by Francis Watson, *Text and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 2-9.

⁶See Jens Zimmerman, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

⁷Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Die Biblische Theologie: Ihre Geschichte und Problematik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970).

⁸I hasten to add that Robinson's views formed the basis of my understanding of the structure of revelation and of biblical theology which I have developed and expounded ever since.

⁹Donald Robinson, “Origins and Unresolved Tensions,” in *Interpreting God's Plan: Biblical Theology and the Pastor* (ed. R. J. Gibson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997). Robinson acknowledges the influence of C. H. Dodd, Oscar Cullmann, and Gabriel Hebert. An influence in my own thinking was John Bright's book *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953).

¹⁰I have discussed this in my articles, “‘Thus says the Lord!’—The Dogmatic Basis of Biblical Theology,” in *God Who Is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to D. B. Knox* (ed. P. T. O'Brien and D. G. Peterson; Homebush West: Lancer, 1986); and “The Ontological and Systematic Roots of Bib-

lical Theology,” *Reformed Theological Review*, 62, no. 3 (2004).

¹¹A recent conservative defence of the historical integrity of the Old Testament is Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

¹²I have discussed this in my book *According to Plan* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002). The matter of the biblical testimony to Christ is further discussed in my book, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

¹³It has, of course, been around much longer. The enthusiasts were perceived by the Reformers as a potent threat to sound biblical teaching.

¹⁴A matter taken up in detail by Jacques de Senarclens, *Heirs of the Reformation* (London: SCM, 1959).

¹⁵While the gospel undoubtedly changes lives, the gospel is not about our changed lives but about the person and work of Jesus.

¹⁶Geerhardus Vos’s *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) was regarded as required reading when I was a student. Yet it is curiously truncated. The former prophets are ignored and the treatment of the New Testament stops with Jesus’ public ministry and omits any detailed treatment of his death or resurrection. Brevard Childs writes from a conservative critical (neo-orthodox?) position in his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). More recently we have a worthy and comprehensive

evangelical offering from Charles Scobie: *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). My own *According to Plan* was intended as a simplified biblical theology suitable for use in churches.

¹⁷More detail can be found in my book *According to Plan*. A simpler form is included in my earlier book *Gospel and Kingdom*, now included in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000).

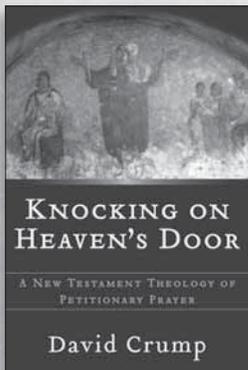
¹⁸I have taken up this point in greater detail in my book *Gospel-Centred Hermeneutics* (Leicester: InterVarsity) to be published later this year.

¹⁹There is an ambiguity in the Greek here, which literally says, “If anyone is in Christ, a new creation.” It could mean “he is a new creation,” or “there is a new creation.” The important point is the perspective of being *in Christ*, and in that way being part of the new creation. The locus of the new creation is in Christ who is in heaven. This does not contradict the subjective aspect of regeneration in the believer, but puts it in perspective. See my article, “Regeneration,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 720-23.

²⁰Exegesis when understood broadly becomes coterminous with hermeneutics. At its heart is biblical theology.

²¹For an excellent example of children’s literature see David Helm, *The Big Picture Story Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

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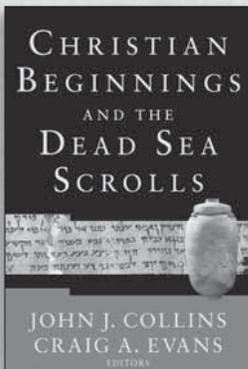


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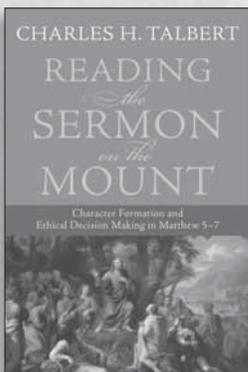


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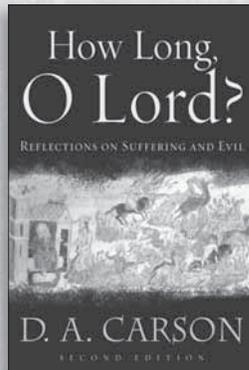


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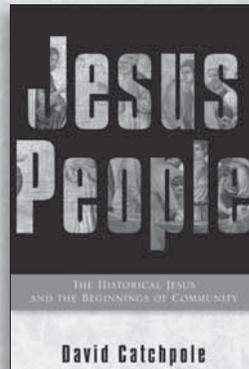


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Preaching and Biblical Theology

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Introduction

The Southern Baptist Convention in this generation has won the battle for the inerrancy of scripture, but we must be vigilant for the next generation will have to strive anew for “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).¹ Satan is the father of lies and extremely subtle, and he will certainly work to subvert the truth of the gospel in the coming days. Nor should we congratulate ourselves too quickly, for conservative churches may embrace the inerrancy of scripture, while denying in practice *the sufficiency* of God's word. We may say that scripture is God's inerrant word, while failing to proclaim it seriously from our pulpits.

In many evangelical churches today we truly have a famine for the word of God. We have sermon series in our conservative churches that feature in their titles television shows like *Gilligan's Island*, *Bonanza*, and *Mary Tyler Moore*. Our preaching often concentrates on steps to a successful marriage or how to raise children in our culture. Such sermons on family issues, of course, are fitting and needed. Unfortunately, two problems often surface in such sermons. First, what the scriptures *actually* say about these subjects is often neglected or skated over. How many sermons on marriage faithfully and urgently set forth what Paul actually says about the roles of men and women (Eph 5:22-33)? Or, is it the case that even we conservatives are somewhat abashed and embarrassed by what the scriptures say?

The second problem is of the same sort, and perhaps even more serious.

In many conservative churches pastors almost always preach on the horizontal level. The congregation is bombarded with sermons about marriage, raising children, success in business, overcoming depression, conquering fears, and so on and so forth. Again, all of these subjects must be faced in our pulpits. We must not go to the other extreme so that we never address these matters. But what is troubling is that these sort of sermons become the staple week in and week out, and the theological worldview that permeates God's word and is the foundation for all of life is passed over in silence. Our pastors turn into moralists rather like Dear Abby who give advice on how to live a happy life week after week.

Many congregations do not realize what is happening because the moral life that is commended accords, at least in part, with scripture and speaks to the felt needs of both believers and unbelievers. Pastors believe they must fill their sermons with stories and illustrations, so that the anecdotes flesh out the moral point enunciated. Every good preacher, naturally, illustrates the points being made. But sermons can become so chock-full of stories and illustrations that they are bereft of any theology.

I have heard evangelicals say rather frequently that we are doing fine in theology because congregations are not complaining about what we teach them. Such a comment is quite frightening, for we as pastors have the responsibility to proclaim “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). We cannot rely on congre-

gational polling to determine whether we are fulfilling our calling, for it may be the case that a congregation has never been seriously taught God's word, so that they are unaware of where we as pastors are failing. Amazingly those who make such comments rely on what people in pews want and feel rather than testing preaching by what the scriptures demand! Paul warns us that "fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29). We are also reminded in 2 Tim 4:3-4 that "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." If we assess our preaching by what congregations desire, we may be cooking a recipe for heresy. I am not saying that our congregations are heretical, only that God's word rather than popular opinion must be the test of faithfulness. It is the calling of pastors to feed the flock with God's word, not to please people with what they desire to hear.

Moreover, too often our congregations are poorly trained by those of us who preach. We have fed them a steady diet of moralistic preaching, so that they are taught to be kind, forgiving, loving, good husbands and wives (all good things of course!), but the theological foundation for such is completely neglected. We have ample illustrations and stories to support the lifestyle we advocate, and people's hearts are warmed and even edified. Meanwhile, the wolf is lurking at the door. How could such preaching open the door for heresy? Not because the pastor himself is heretical. He may be fully orthodox and faithful in his own theology, while neglecting to preach to his people the

storyline and theology of the Bible. He has *assumed* theology in all his preaching. So, in the next generation or in two or three generations the congregation may inadvertently and unknowingly call a more liberal pastor. He too preaches that people should be good, kind, and loving. He too emphasizes that we should have good marriages and dynamic relationships. The people in the pew may not even discern the difference. The theology seems to be just like the theology of the conservative pastor who preceded him. And in a sense it is, for the conservative pastor *never* proclaimed or preached his theology. The conservative pastor believed in the inerrancy of scripture but not its sufficiency, for he did not proclaim all that the scriptures teach to his congregation.

Our ignorance of biblical theology surfaces constantly. I can think of two occasions in the last ten years or so (one in a large stadium by a speaker whose name I cannot recall) where a large crowd was gathered and people were invited to come forward to receive Christ as Savior. The sermon in the stadium was intended to be an evangelistic sermon, but I can honestly say that the gospel was not proclaimed at all. Nothing was said about Christ crucified and risen, or *why* he was crucified and risen. Nothing was said about why faith saves instead of works. Thousands came forward, and were no doubt duly recorded as saved. But I scratched my head as to what was really happening, and prayed that at least some were truly being converted. The same was true in a church service where I visited, for a stirring invitation to come forward and be saved was extended, but without any explanation of the gospel! Such preaching may fill up our churches with unconverted people, who are doubly dangerous because they have