

Lecture 2: Biblical Theology in the Seminary and Bible College¹

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The Awakening and Its Implications: A Personal Confession and Testimony

At the risk of appearing to be self-serving, I want to give you some idea of what makes me tick as a biblical theologian. I think this is necessary if you are to appreciate my position and to assess its relevance to yourselves. I am a child of my country and its culture, and of the spiritual heritage of Calvinistic evangelical Anglicanism through which I was converted at the age of sixteen.

In the year 1770, the year Beethoven was born and the year of the Boston massacre, Lieutenant James Cook, Royal Navy, sailed a 106-foot-long converted Yorkshire collier, His Majesty's Barque *Endeavour*, up the entire length of the east coast of Australia, mapping some 2,000 miles of it as he went. Six years later, an ongoing dispute between King George III and the British colonies in North America had come to a head. This resulted in the unavailability of those regions as a dumping ground for the malcontents and petty criminals of Britain and Ireland. Consequently, attention turned to the newly charted east coast of Australia as an alternate venue to which the riff-raff could be sent. On January 26, 1788, after a voyage of eight months, Captain Arthur Phillip, in command of a fleet of eleven ships, moored in Sydney Cove and established the first European settlement in Australia as a British penal colony. Among those who landed was the Reverend Richard

Johnson, an evangelical Anglican minister. The inclusion of a chaplain to the first fleet had been planned for some time, but the decision to appoint Johnson to this post appears to have been influenced by some prominent evangelicals including William Wilberforce and John Newton.

On a street corner in Sydney's Central Business District there now stands a stone commemorative monument marking the venue of the first Christian service in Australia, held on February 3, 1788, and recording that Johnson preached on Psalm 116:12: "What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?" The content of the sermon is now lost but there is some conjecture that, as an evangelical, Johnson would have included verse 13 in his exposition: "I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord." It cannot be claimed that the present evangelical nature of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney is due to Johnson. But, certainly the evangelical make-up of the diocese goes back to these beginnings that were built on by a succession of key evangelical leaders.

I began my theological studies at Moore College in Sydney in 1956. The college was founded a hundred years earlier in 1856 by the evangelical bishop of Sydney, Frederick Barker. He had been influenced by the great Charles Simeon in Cambridge, and he remained a staunch evangelical throughout his life. The nineteenth century was a time of rampant secularism during which

the older universities in Australia were established without theological faculties. Consequently, the training of clergy had to be done elsewhere. Up till this time the Church of England in Australia had relied on English and Irish clergy coming to the colonies. This dependence on imported church leaders lasted, many would think, much longer than it should have. Marcus Loane, the Principal of Moore College when I entered in 1956, was in 1966 to become the first Australian Archbishop of Sydney. As one of the oldest tertiary institutions in Australia, Moore College was set up to train clergy for the Anglican Church. One hundred and fifty years later, it remains an Anglican institution with its main purpose to train clergy for the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. But it has become quite international and interdenominational with a small but steady stream of Presbyterian, Baptist, and other students, and students from Britain, Europe, and the USA, as well as from South America, south and south-east Asia.

When I entered Moore, I had never heard of biblical theology and would probably have understood the term to mean simply theology that accorded with the Bible and was thus orthodox and not unbiblical. There was no distinct course of Biblical Theology taught at that time. We were, however, urged to read John Bright's *The Kingdom of God*, and Geerhardus Vos's *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*. Edmund Clowney's *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, published in 1961, was also to have a considerable influence at Moore. Moves toward instruction in biblical theology as a distinct discipline had begun at Moore in the early 1950s when Donald Robinson taught a course in the story of the Bible with emphasis

on the people of God. As far as I know, Moore College was for some time the only theological or Bible college in Australia to teach a course in biblical theology.

In 1996 the annual School of Theology at Moore, a series of public lectures, was devoted to the subject of biblical theology. The first paper was given by Donald Robinson who for many years was vice-principal of the college before taking up the post of Bishop of Parramatta and subsequently Archbishop of Sydney. As he had been largely responsible for introducing biblical theology to the curriculum, Robinson was asked to tell something of how it came to be established as a subject at Moore. The printed versions of these School of Theology lectures by Bishop Robinson and other members of the Moore faculty were published in a little volume, *Interpreting God's Plan*.² Robinson first considers the possibility that the nature of his account "reflects the relative isolation of Australia from wider theological discourse in the period under review."³ Robinson describes how the Anglo-Catholic monk, Gabriel Hebert, in 1957 gave lectures to the Brisbane Anglican Clergy School on the subject of "Christ the Fulfiller." He comments, "In these he propounded an outline of the contents of the Bible in three stages somewhat similar to that which I was developing in the Moore College course."⁴ In commenting on Hebert's published criticism of the *New Bible Commentary*, to which Robinson himself had contributed, he noted that

Hebert thought the New Bible Commentary was weak and timid in exegesis, that it lacked a full world view, an integrated biblical theology, and an adequate view of the church. My point in rehearsing all this is that our biblical theology course was being fashioned in the

midst of an on-going debate with Dr Hebert himself—of a most charitable and constructive kind, I should say—on these very questions.⁵

Robinson explains that in the development of the course, “The aim was to assist [the students] in their approach to theological study in general, and to the study of the Bible in particular.”⁶ He further comments that, “A distinction was drawn between the study of the Christian religion in its various aspects (including credal doctrines, church history, Prayer Book) and the study of the Bible in its own terms to discover what it is all about.”⁷ This phrase, “the study of the Bible *in its own terms*” (italics mine), is the key to Robinson’s approach to biblical theology.

Robinson developed the course into a treatment of seven main issues:⁸

- (1) The character of the Bible: its scope and structure.
- (2) The people of God; including a study of the biblical covenants.
- (3) The significance of Abraham and his seed. This dealt with the biblical story of the outworking of the promises to Abraham as it reached its climax with David and Solomon.
- (4) A treatment of the two great themes of exodus/redemption, and land/inheritance.
- (5) The prophetic view of promise and fulfilment.
- (6) The New Testament claim that all this is fulfilled in Christ.
- (7) Principles of biblical interpretation.

Here Robinson comments significantly:

Based on the foregoing understanding of what the Bible is “about”, we enunciated a biblical “typology” using the three stages in the outworking of God’s promise to Abraham, that is, (a) the historical experience of the fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham through the exodus to the kingdom of David’s son in the land of inheritance, (b)

the projection of this fulfilment into the future of the day of the Lord, by the prophets, during the period of decline, fall, exile and return, and (c) the true fulfilment in Christ and the Spirit in Jesus’ incarnation, death, resurrection, exaltation and in his parousia as judge and saviour in a new heaven and new earth.⁹

I remember well the occasion in late 1957, my second year as a student at Moore, when I first heard this scheme expounded. It was in the context of an Old Testament lecture and Donald Robinson was the lecturer. A student, with more than a trace of pain in his voice, asked the pointed question as to how all this material we had been seeking to absorb over the course really fitted together. Robinson expounded briefly the three-fold schema to which I have just alluded. If anything ever did, this blew my mind. I went away and drew a diagram of it, and began to think about the principles involved and to fill in for myself the details. I have been doing that ever since. Robinson’s summary of biblical theology as “a biblical typology using the three stages in the outworking of God’s promise to Abraham” is, in my opinion, the key to the matter. It is to Donald Robinson that I owe my initial insights into the structure and content of revelation that constitute the subject of biblical theology.

How things have changed! English and Irish evangelicals established the evangelical nature of Sydney diocese and Moore College. British and continental theologians, along with some notable Americans in the Reformed tradition, were the key twentieth century influences in biblical theology being established in Australia. But, in a review of the published 1996 Moore College lectures, *Interpreting God’s Plan*, Chris Green, an Englishman and vice-principal of Oak

Hill College in London wrote this rather whimsical yet flattering assessment:

Like the duck-billed platypus, contemporary biblical theology is an Australian animal the existence of which many have doubted and even mocked. Is it a hybrid? A joke? An aberration? An impossibility?

The analogy is cute even if not entirely accurate. There is no doubt that Moore College's love affair with biblical theology has rubbed off onto some modern evangelicals in England and also further afield. It is also being planted by Moore College graduates doing missionary work in Africa, South America, Asia, and Europe. It is being further developed as courses by the Moore College Department of External Studies which has some 5,000 students in over fifty countries. But, let us not forget the European and American influences that were behind things being started at Moore in the first place. It is true that, for a long time Australian theology, like the Australian fauna, seems to have reflected our comparative isolation from the rest of the world. I would suggest that the acceptance of biblical theology once it was at all understood, at least in part reflects the situation that Australian Christians felt in a society that was from its outset highly secular and lacking the kind of Christian foundations that shaped early American society. We needed the Bible to be intelligible in order to combat secularism from a fairly fragile base.

In 1973 I was invited to be a visiting lecturer at Moore College and to teach the course of Biblical Theology to first-year students. I set about to teach for one hour per week the three-fold schema proposed by Donald Robinson and that I had been working over in my mind for the previous fifteen years. I had come to the conclusion

over time that this schema laid bare the structure of biblical revelation far better than any of the other proposals that I was aware of.

Inevitably the students asked about books on the subject and I found it difficult to suggest any beyond John Bright's *The Kingdom of God* and Clowney's *Preaching and Biblical Theology*. But, my views differed from these books in some significant ways. Soon the students began to badger me to write something myself; a suggestion I rejected as foolish. In time, however, the students prevailed. With the promise of editorial help from a former student who was going into Christian publishing, I began the task as soon as I had moved with my family to Brisbane in 1975. *Gospel and Kingdom*¹⁰ was completed in early 1976 and was rejected as unsuitable for publication by an Australian and a British publisher in turn. It was eventually taken up by Paternoster Press in England.

Gospel and Kingdom finally saw the light of day in 1981 and is still in print, a fact that reflects the need for such a work rather than any literary value. Two other biblical studies, one on the Book of Revelation and one on the Wisdom literature followed, both published by Paternoster. My next attempt at biblical theology, *According to Plan*,¹¹ published in 1991, was geared at being a little more comprehensive in treating the whole Bible than *Gospel and Kingdom* had been. It was worked out on the ground in the context of a local church in Brisbane and tried out chapter by chapter on several successive groups of ordinary church members.

When I returned full-time to Moore College in 1995 I was again given the task of teaching the first-year course in Biblical Theology. By this time Moore

had expanded its curriculum well beyond the basic ordination course taught when I was a student. Now independent of the Anglican regulatory body, i.e., the Australian College of Theology, Moore gains its accreditation from the Department of Education of the State of New South Wales. There are three different one-year diploma courses for lay people who want to get a basic knowledge of the Bible and theology. The three-year Bachelor of Theology is the basic course for ministerial candidates. The four-year Bachelor of Divinity is the requirement for Anglican ordinands in the Diocese of Sydney. There is a part-time M.A. in theology, a full-time research M.Th. degree, and the Ph.D. can be done in conjunction with either the University of Sydney or the University of Western Sydney. The point I want to make is that in all the undergraduate theology courses (the three one-year diplomas, the B.Th., and the B.D.) biblical theology is a compulsory subject over and above the normal courses in Old and New Testaments. A student transferring from another college and seeking credits will only be granted them on successful completion of the course in biblical theology.

Why is biblical theology, as a distinct and compulsory course, so important to the ethos of an evangelical college like Moore? Again I must burden you with a little of our local history. If it does not cause you to question the place of biblical theology in the American scene, perhaps you will at least understand something of what has been driving it in our corner of Australia.

I believe it was just after the conclusion of World War II that Moore College expanded its two-year ordination course with a preliminary year to concentrate on study of the Bible, and to break the back

of New Testament Greek. It was into this preliminary year that biblical theology was later introduced. It is, I think, fair to say that one important failure that this subject helped to address was the lack of any explicit integration in the core subjects of the ordination course. There was also the need to improve biblical literacy. In the biblical studies curricula of the externally regulated ordination course there was nothing to require any interaction between the subjects. Of special concern was the fact that the current academic ethos encouraged the complete separation of the two parts of biblical studies: Old Testament and New Testament. For better or for worse, this formal separation has remained in the Moore College curricula. But, I have great confidence that the main reason for this is practical and not ideological.

Christian ministry is concerned to bring salvation, in the broadest biblical sense of that word, to people by evangelism and nurture. It requires the comprehensive application of the gospel. The gospel gets people converted and is, thus, necessary in evangelism to build up the church and because people need saving. But, contrary to some popular misconceptions, we do not move on *from* the gospel in Christian living, but *with* the gospel. The gospel is the power of God for *all* of salvation, and this means that it is also the matrix for sanctification. And it will be the gospel that brings us to the consummation in final glorification.

This raises all kinds of questions, not least about preaching and teaching the Bible in churches. I will return to that in my next lecture. But, if we understand the seminary to be the place where people are prepared for such gospel-oriented ministries, the question is raised about how

the gospel is taught. We need to ask how the Old Testament relates to such gospel ministry. At the very least, we have to say that the study of the Old Testament is the study of the gospel in type. God's dealings with Israel testify to and foreshadow the gospel. The New Testament, then, is the exposition of the gospel as Jesus fulfils the expectations of the Old Testament. Christian doctrine expounds in contemporary terms the implications of the gospel for our understanding of God, humanity, and the created world. Church History is the study of how successive generations of Christians have understood and responded to the gospel in the world.

In an evangelical seminary, the almost complete separation of biblical studies from systematic theology, that Francis Watson laments in his book *Text and Truth*,¹² is unlikely to happen. In other words, teachers of systematic theology will endeavor to teach what they believe to be biblical and, therefore, true doctrine. But how will the students perceive the relationship of systematic theology to the Bible? What is the goal of biblical studies? The legacy of Gabler and the Enlightenment was to bring about the separation of Old Testament and New Testament even by biblical theologians. The writing of biblical theologies of the whole Bible was overshadowed in the twentieth century by the plethora of either Old Testament or New Testament theologies. Even evangelical biblical scholars largely avoided the task of an integrated biblical theology. No doubt the necessary division of labor and the sheer size of the task would be cited in defence of this situation. The writing of biblical theologies of the whole Bible has always been seen as problematic. One reason for this is that

the theological relationship of the two Testaments remains perhaps the greatest of the ongoing problems for biblical studies. Even when we assert that there is no ideological reason for separating the two Testaments, the need for division of labor still exists. This difficulty is surely reflected in the seminary and Bible college curricula.

I think that there are at least two questions that must be constantly before the seminary and Bible college. The first is "What shall we do with the Bible?" and the second is the question Jesus asked, "What do you think of the Christ: whose Son is he?" These two questions are inter-related in that the answer to each depends on the answer to the other. This does not reduce to a vicious circle, for we believe that the sovereignty of God in salvation brings us to a subjective conviction of the objective truth of the gospel and, thus, of the Bible. I refer again to the place of the inner testimony of the Spirit who works in tandem with the Word of God.

Unity and Distinction of Theological Disciplines

One approach to defining biblical theology, as a subject for the curriculum, is to state it negatively in contrast to other theological disciplines. In this regard, there is some agreement that biblical theology can be distinguished from systematic theology; and that it is in some sense historical and descriptive of what is in the Bible. We may also recognize both continuity with historical theology as well as important differences. We can define biblical theology at its simplest as theology as the Bible reveals it (that is, within its historical framework and, thus, as a process). Geerhardus Vos defines it thus: "[biblical theology is] that branch

of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.”¹³ This self-revelation involves the word of God, communicated within history, and revealing the nature of God’s acts within human history. Vos’s relating of biblical theology to exegetical theology (exegesis with a view to getting at the theological content of the text) reminds us that it deals with the exegesis of the *unique* text that we have received as the inspired word of God.

In seeking to compare and contrast the nature of biblical theology with other theological disciplines we should not overlook the difficulty in strictly defining the parameters of each, or in assessing the relationship they bear to one another. Historically, the Reformation provided an essential impetus to biblical theology. Even modern Roman Catholic biblical studies must owe something to the fact that the Bible was released from its bondage to a clerical monopoly. This was, of course, not only due to the Reformers’ recovery of the Bible, and translations into the vernacular, but also to the invention of the printing press. I have already alluded briefly (in Lecture 1) to the fact that Calvin in particular emphasized a presuppositional approach that grounded the hermeneutics and method of biblical study in the Bible itself. Our ultimate presupposition is the ontological Trinity revealed through Jesus Christ. The presuppositional framework includes those basic biblical assertions that involve the epistemology both of the unregenerate and of the regenerate person. Bearing in mind this presuppositional basis for biblical theology, we can seek to distinguish it from other disciplines in terms of method and scope.

Biblical Theology is Distinct from Systematic or Dogmatic Theology

When teaching biblical theology, I constantly reminded the students that to be good biblical theologians they need also to be good systematic theologians. While some distinguish systematic from dogmatic theology (systematic theology following a logical or philosophical organization, and dogmatics following a church confessional organization) I will treat them here as one. This is “Doctrine.” It is systematic because it involves the systematic organization and classification of the data of biblical doctrines on some kind of logical basis. Biblical theology, on the other hand, adopts mainly redemptive-historical and thematic perspectives. Systematics is dogmatic in that it is the orderly arrangement of the teachings of a particular view of Christianity. Dogmatics involves the crystallization of teachings as the end of the process of revelation and as “what is to be believed now.” While a high view of doctrine would maintain that there is a certain absolute and unchangeable nature to the truth, it nevertheless strives to represent it in a contemporary fashion that is both understandable and applicable in the present.

Doctrine does not seem to be very highly regarded by a lot of evangelicals, which is not only a pity, it is perilous. In some cases it is due to a lack of careful teaching or the failure to draw out the doctrinal implications of a sermon. It is a challenge to the professors of theology to so enthuse the seminary students with the importance of theology and doctrine that they will see it as an integral part of their on-going ministry.

Biblical theology looks at the progressive revelation that leads to the final

formulation of doctrine. But, we remind ourselves that, while systematic theology is derivative of biblical theology, the two continually interact. The relationship of biblical and systematic theology is subject to ongoing debate. While some of the early impulse for biblical theology came from the dissatisfaction with a sterile orthodox approach to dogmatics, some biblical theologies were nevertheless driven by dogmatics in that the categories of dogmatic theology were used for the organization of biblical theology and its concepts. This is one step away from theology as the Bible presents it. This organizational feature should be clearly distinguished from the necessary use of dogmatic truths as the presuppositions for doing biblical theology.

While there is an important sense in which biblical theology is derivative of dogmatics, it is also true to assert that biblical theology stems from a dogmatic basis. This is the point I made in my first lecture that the ultimate presuppositions of our dogmatic base go back to the effectual call of the gospel of Christ. It is his self-authenticating word that alone can bring submission to the authority of the Bible and engender a thirst for it as the word of God. If it is true to say, as I believe it is, that we begin with Christ so that we may end with Christ, the formal expression of this is that we begin with a doctrinal presupposition so that we may end with formulated doctrine.

In his editorial to *Themelios* (vol. 27, no. 3 [2001]) Carl Trueman expressed some concern that the resurgence of biblical theology in Britain, which had been partly fuelled by its revival in Australia, was showing a downside. He did not dispute the importance of biblical theology, but felt that, at least in the way some handled

it in Britain, it was leading to a neglect of systematic theology in general and of Trinitarian ontology in particular. I was constrained to respond to this in an article that Trueman graciously accepted and published in *Themelios* (vol. 28, no. 1 [2002]). I felt that biblical theology was being blamed for a problem that probably had other causes. I had first expressed my views on the dogmatic basis of biblical theology in an essay for the Broughton Knox *Festschrift* published in 1986.¹⁴ That “Jesus is Lord and Christ” is a dogmatic assertion which drives biblical theology:

Christ authenticated himself and established the dogmatic basis upon which the first Christians engaged in the task of understanding and interpreting their Old Testament scriptures. From the outset a fundamental Christology determines biblical theology. It is Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate, who informs the biblical theologian of what actually is happening in the whole expanse of revelation.¹⁵

The question of the relationship of systematic and biblical theology has been aired by a number of biblical scholars over the years. Kevin Vanhoozer, in his 1994 Finlayson Lecture in Edinburgh, argued for the refinement of the biblical theologian’s approach to the various literary genre of the Bible.¹⁶ It is a reminder that the matter of how language works and is used by biblical authors is crucial to theology. Mostly the evangelical approach has been to see a logical progression from exegesis to a biblical-theological synthesis of the sum of exegetical exercises, and thence to the formulation of doctrine. There is, of course, an undeniable logic to this. My concern has been to keep this within the evangelical hermeneutical spiral. On these terms, biblical theology

is the activity of the epistemologically regenerated mind that adopts the gospel as its *pou stō*, its fundamental reference point.

Biblical Theology is Distinct from Historical Theology

If Biblical Theology is an historical discipline, how does it differ from historical theology? The latter is usually taken to be the study of the history of Christian doctrine or, more broadly, the history of Christian ideas. It looks at the way the church came to formulate doctrines at different periods of its history. It is interested in key Christian theologians and thinkers, and in the struggles that so often led to the formulation of doctrines and confessions of faith. It is, thus, an important dimension of church history. Biblical theologians and dogmaticians are concerned with the history of theology because we do not want constantly to reinvent the wheel, nor do we want repeatedly to fall foul of ancient heresies. To put it another way, we do not do theology in a vacuum but from within a living and historical community of believers. We go on evaluating the benefits of climbing on the backs of the theologians that have gone before us.

In one sense historical theology is a continuation of biblical theology in that it reflects on the theology of God's people at any given time. But there is an obvious difference: just as the theological views of Israel at any given point in history do not necessarily coincide with the theology of the Old Testament, so too in the history of the church, the theology of the people is not necessarily, in fact never is completely, the theology of Jesus and the apostles. The source materials of the two disciplines are different. Historical

theology looks at how people responded to the gospel revelation. Biblical theology seeks to understand the revelation itself as it unfolds.

Biblical Theology is Distinct from Practical or Pastoral Theology

In general terms we are here talking about formulations of different aspects of the way the Word of God impinges on people's lives. Theologies of evangelism, church ministry and life, Christian education, counselling, marriage and human relationships, pastoral care, and the like would all fit into this category. If systematic theology is derivative of biblical theology, then pastoral theology is derivative of systematic theology. Systematic theology is concerned with the contemporary application of biblical truth. Pastoral theology involves certain specifics of this contemporizing as it deals with Christian behavior and practice. Biblical theology interacts with, and even presupposes certain aspects of systematic theology. In the same way systematic theology will find that it must interact with pastoral theology so that it may address the ongoing needs of the people of God.

Biblical Theology in Ministerial Training

Geerhardus Vos was installed as professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Seminary in 1894. In his inaugural lecture, he propounded his view of the nature of biblical theology. He then went on to say,

I have not forgotten, however, that you have called me to teach this science for the eminently practical purpose of training young men for the ministry of the Gospel.¹⁷

Given that most theological curricula in

the seminaries and Bible colleges seem to reflect their nineteenth century roots, can biblical theology be taught within such a framework? I have argued that, to be true to our evangelical view of the Bible, we must engage biblical theology. The evangelical institution is in an overall better position to shape a biblically based course than an institution driven by liberalism. But, history suggests that a self-conscious and intentional inclusion of biblical theology is not endemic in evangelical institutions. If I am right in suggesting that this reflects our indebtedness to patterns of pedagogy that developed under the Enlightenment, then it is alarming. If it is driven by the desire to maintain high academic standards that require a division of labor, that is another matter. I suspect that there is a further reason for the lack of formal courses in biblical theology. It is, I think, largely due to the uncertainties that have surrounded the subject, and the general state of flux that still exists. As recently as 2001, J. G. McConville of Gloucestershire University (UK) wrote,

Biblical theology is a somewhat slippery creature, which at times basks in the sun and at other times retreats quietly, or even ignominiously, into the shade. If it seems at first glance to have a simplicity about it, this is deceptive, and it has a habit of changing its form when it re-emerges for another phase of its life. At present, Biblical theology shows signs of reaching its prime, after a spell in the wilderness.¹⁸

I suggest that it is up to the evangelical scholars, seminaries and colleges to see that this prime, if such it is, does not lead to another retreat into the shade. Two things at least will be needed for this: first, the ongoing struggle to define the foundations, the parameters, the method, and the structure of biblical

theology, and, second, the implementation of courses of instruction in biblical theology at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

An examination of the literature by evangelical biblical theologians illustrates what I mean. There are clearly differences of opinion about how to do biblical theology, and, thus, of what a first course in biblical theology should look like. Writers such as Vos, Clowney, and Van Gemeren have given their analyses of the structure of revelation. But a comparison of them shows little agreement. More recently Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen have published *The Drama of Scripture*¹⁹ designed as a text for an introductory course in biblical theology. There are great strengths to this book but it fails, in my opinion, to adequately deal with the structure of revelation. I myself believe that the structure proposed by Hebert and Robinson is the one that best lays bare the matrix of progressive revelation.

Brevard Childs comments that G. E. Wright lamented the neglect of biblical theology in America, saying that it was difficult to find a leading graduate school where one could specialize in it.²⁰ When I did a graduate segment on biblical theology, it was about biblical theologians, not about the Bible itself. I believe we need biblical theology as one of the first courses in Bible for all seminary students. My opinion that is bred of my own experiences is that biblical theology should not only be a distinct subject in the seminary, but also it should be a compulsory core subject for anyone aspiring to be a teacher of God's word. But, can biblical theology be taught within a curriculum structure that does not include it as a discreet subject? Of course it can. But will it be? The answer to that depends on the faculty

and the curriculum requirements of the seminary. Within the departments of biblical studies, will the Old Testament professors know what the New Testament professors are doing, and *vice versa*? Will the teachers of biblical studies engender a sense of biblical theology and train the students in its method?

The separation of the disciplines was encouraged by the secular tone of the universities. Even in Europe, Britain, and the US, once the Enlightenment had taken hold, the separation was seen as the academically respectable way to go. But, in my understanding, the seminary and the Bible college are significantly different from the university in their aims. They will overlap to varying degrees with the aims of the university faculties of religion and theology, but their distinct task is to prepare people for gospel ministry in the church of God. So, what kind of training is necessary to best prepare men and women for the whole range of ministries in the church? At least since the nineteenth century, the typical seminary curricula have centered on the three areas of Bible, Doctrine, and History, and these, with a variety of skills training, will go on providing the core of ministerial education. It would be hard, I think, to argue against their inclusion in some way or other.

How such core courses are conducted and with what kind of curricula is still an issue. In considering this we should be driven by our understanding of Christian ministry and what lies at its heart. But, our understanding of Christian ministry will depend to a great degree on what we do with the Bible. At a conference on revisioning theological education for the twenty-first century held in Nairobi in 1998, Victor Babajide Cole raised the

important matter of integration in the theological curriculum.²¹ In particular he was concerned with the relationship of theoretical theology to ministerial practice. He referred to a book by Elliot Eisner who suggested that formal school curricula fall into three categories. These are (1) the explicit curriculum of what the school intentionally and in reality offers to students; (2) the implied curriculum of non-salient aspects of what the school in fact teaches students but not intentionally so; and (3) the “null” curriculum of things deliberately omitted from teaching by the school. Biblical theology will be in one or other of these categories, but in an evangelical ministry school I believe it belongs in the explicit curriculum. It may, by default, be part of the implied curriculum in biblical studies, which means that it is probably a part of standard training in exegesis. If it is in the “null” curriculum, its absence will speak volumes in the way students learn to handle the Bible and how they pass on their habits to those they preach to and teach.

As a teacher of Old Testament, I sometimes found myself out of step with colleagues who thought that Old Testament means just that, and that establishing links with the New Testament are not our business. I had to disagree because I saw before me each day men and women who would go on to various ministry positions to expound the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. Don Carson made a similar point in his important 1995 article:

All Christian theologians, including those whose area of specialization is the Old Testament or some part of it, are under obligation to read the Old Testament, in certain respects, with Christian eyes. . . . [N]o Christian *Alttestamentler* has the right to leave the challenge of biblical study to the New Testament depart-

ments. The Gospel records insist that Jesus himself, and certainly his earliest followers after him, read the Old Testament in christological ways. Jesus berated his followers for not discerning these points themselves.²²

The bottom line in this is the question: will the integration of theological studies into a workable basis for Christian ministry be left to the students themselves, or will the structure of the course provide at least some guidance in this important matter? I have reason to believe that once students are aware of the potential of biblical theology they are keen to engage it. In recent years we have had a succession of students coming to Moore College all the way from Britain and the United States with the express purpose of taking advantage of instruction in evangelical biblical theology.

Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics

The relationship of the twin concerns of biblical theology and hermeneutics was something that took me somewhat unawares. When I wrote *Gospel and Kingdom*, the title I proposed was the rather prosaic *A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament*. In his wisdom, Peter Cousins, the editor at Paternoster Press, chose *Gospel and Kingdom* as the title and my proposal became the sub-title. On the second printing the back cover contained a piece of a rather generous review from a British journal, *The Christian Graduate*. It began, "At last! A book on hermeneutics for the ordinary man in the pew." It suddenly dawned how thick-headed I had been not to realize that my pursuit of a biblical theology was an exercise in hermeneutics. I have been rather relentless in applying this insight, if coming

to see the blindingly obvious can be called an insight. When I wanted to give something back for the three years I had been able to spend at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia devoting myself for most of the time to the study of the Wisdom literature, it seemed only right and logical to write something of a biblical theology of wisdom for ordinary Christians. Hence *Gospel and Wisdom*²³ was the result. Now, I rarely tackle a subject that requires Christian comment and appraisal without asking the biblical theological question. My method is to start with Jesus and the apostles to make clear that we always go back to the Old Testament to read it through Christian eyes. I start with Christ so that I may finish with him. Hermeneutically he is the Alpha and the Omega.

While there is a great deal of literature available on a whole range of important topics written by credible and able evangelical theologians, the place of biblical theology as a way of gaining a good understanding of specific matters is not so much in evidence. It seemed to me that this can only reflect our failure to instruct students, the future preachers, teachers, and writers, in biblical theology as a method of coming to grips with the multitude of topical issues that face the ordinary Christian. When Moore College gave me time off to write my book on preaching,²⁴ I searched through a mass of literature in the Moore College library on the theory and practice of preaching. The element almost totally lacking in books by evangelical as well as non-evangelical writers, even those who saw expository preaching as of prime importance, was biblical theology as one of the preacher's key tools of trade.

When, at the suggestion of a student, I

set out to write my book on *Prayer and the Knowledge of God*,²⁵ again I searched the literature. I could not find anything that approached being a biblical theology of prayer. Most of the books were about the importance, the purpose, and the practice of prayer. How can such a massive and important subject be really understood without tracing its part in the progressive revelation in the Bible?

Because Christian ministry is gospel ministry, seminary teachers need to understand that we are all *interdependent* in our own specialities. Our common love of the Bible means that we should be more aware of how the Bible is being taught and applied in courses other than our own. The great advantage of the wider move to canonical theology is the serious manner in which it treats the Christian Bible as one book. As I have already indicated, evangelicals have always been people of the canon, though unfortunately this is often the theory rather than the practice. No professor of New Testament studies can avoid dealing with the wider canon since the Old Testament keeps appearing as the presupposition to the theology of the New Testament. Old Testament professors perhaps need the canonical perspective to be more intentionally before them. For me it was the theology of the Old Testament that found its fulfilment in the New that made it imperative to at least raise the question of how the Old Testament should be interpreted as Christian Scripture. The other motivation was the pastoral one and the conviction that the Old Testament is a book about Christ. At the 2000 Wheaton conference on biblical theology, Paul House commented, “[F]rom positive collaboration with bibli-

cal, dogmatic, philosophical and practical scholars I am convinced that unitary biblical theology is the best venue for experts in these fields to share their best insights with one another.”²⁶

Summary Conclusion

This lecture has been very much a personal odyssey that I hope has not been tedious for you. There are at least two reasons why I have gone down this track. The first is that I think it is important for people to understand how a particular emphasis arose and why there is a bit of a crusade going on to promote biblical theology. The second is related, in that I am still on a mission. That mission is to try to remove some of the ambiguity and uncertainty about the pursuit of biblical theology as a distinct discipline in its own right. I wish that every seminary and Bible college would take up the challenge to provide an introductory course in “big picture” biblical theology and then strive to keep the vision alive in the way biblical studies are conducted.

I believe that it is doubly important that evangelical colleges teach biblical theology, deliberately, intentionally, and not just hope that the biblical studies teachers between them will get the message across. One reason why it is not done is specialization. A second is that academic deans and registrars are understandably shy of one more course on top of the large number already clamoring for attention as necessary in ministerial training. A third is perhaps the main reason for the neglect of biblical theology. Even among evangelicals there is no real consensus about what biblical theology is and how it should be done. Because of these difficulties, I recognize that the approach to biblical theology in

individual seminaries and Bible colleges may differ from what I have suggested. I certainly do not want to imply criticism of situations of which I have no knowledge or do not understand. These are my personal convictions born of my experience as a Christian minister living in one of the most secular of western societies.

I will close on this note: I believe that, if we begin with Christ clothed in his gospel and work out from there, not only is biblical theology possible, but it is an absolute necessity in order to be consistent with the gospel. At a time when everything seems to conspire to convey a sense of the diversity of Scripture, we need to recover its unity within diversity. An evangelical biblical theology employs the Trinitarian and Christological perspective of unity *and* diversity. I can think of no better way to make the great Reformation dicta become realities as we proclaim salvation that is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, grounded on the Scriptures alone, and all this to the glory of God alone.

ENDNOTES

¹This article was originally presented as part of the Gheens Lectures, delivered March 18-20, 2008, at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

²D. W. B. Robinson, "Origins and Unresolved Tensions," in *Interpreting God's Plan* (ed. R. J. Gibson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 5.

³Ibid., 1.

⁴Ibid., 5

⁵Ibid., 6.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 7-9.

⁹Ibid., 9.

¹⁰*Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Inter-*

pretation of the Old Testament (Exeter: Paternoster, 1981).

¹¹*According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1991).

¹²Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

¹³Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 13.

¹⁴"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), 25-40.

¹⁵Ibid., 33.

¹⁶Kevin Vanhoozer, "From Canon to Concept: 'Same' and 'Other' in the Relation Between Biblical and Systematic Theology," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12, no. 2 (1994): 96-124.

¹⁷G. Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (ed. R. B. Gaffin; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980).

¹⁸J. G. McConville, "Biblical Theology: Canon and Plain Sense," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 19, no. 2 (2001): 134.

¹⁹Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

²⁰Craig Bartholemew, "Introduction" to *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Scripture and Hermeneutics Series; vol. 5; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 4.

²¹Victor Babajide Cole, "Integration in the

Theological Curriculum," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 23, no. 2 (1999): 141-62.

²²D. A. Carson, "Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 40f.

²³Now included in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2000).

²⁴*Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

²⁵*Prayer and the Knowledge of God: What the Whole Bible Teaches* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2003).

²⁶Paul House, "Biblical Theology and the Wholeness of Scripture," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. Scott Hafemann; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 270.