

Lecture 3: Biblical Theology in the Local Church and the Home¹

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Biblical Theology and Expository Preaching

In his book, *The Sermon Under Attack*, Klaas Runia quotes P. T. Forsyth as saying, “It is, perhaps, an overbold beginning, but I will venture to say that with its preaching Christianity stands and falls.”² There is no doubt that we are faced with the hard questions of the nature of preaching and its importance. Do we capitulate to the modern theorists and theologians, or do we press on and preach the traditional Sunday sermon expounding the Bible and calling people to repentance and faith? Do we persevere in this even if it seems that in numbers of regular listeners we may be losing ground? As far back as the early 1970’s, a survey in the United States showed that, on the whole, evangelical seminaries were growing at a time that many of the more liberal ones were struggling to maintain numbers of students. Certainly that is still the situation in Australia. Many evangelicals would suggest that their emphasis on the Bible as the focus of the teaching and preaching of the church is one main reason for such growth. Anecdotal evidence would indicate that there is something in this claim.

Evangelical Protestants stand in a long and venerable tradition, going back to the Reformation, of the centrality of preaching in the activities of the gathered congregation. We could appeal to the practice of the Reformers, the Puritans, and the leaders of the Evangelical revival, not to mention all the great preachers of

the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. There are stirring accounts of men like Wesley, Whitefield, Spurgeon and, more recently, Campbell Morgan, Lloyd-Jones, and Billy Graham, whose preaching to thousands was profoundly effective in the conversion and edification of so many. We have to ask about the stimulus for this activity through which multitudes have been converted to Christ. Can it really be simply a passing phenomenon destined to become outdated as we have now entered a more technologically oriented age of electronic communication media? There are good biblical reasons for not giving up on preaching the word.

To begin with, there is a close relationship between preaching and biblical theology. Peter Adam, in his article, “Preaching and Biblical Theology” in the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* says that we can summarize a biblical theology of preaching thus: “God has spoken; It is written; Preach the Word.”³ We can of course be more precise about such a biblical theology to show how the practice of proclamation of the Word of God lies at the very heart of the biblical story of salvation. On the one hand a biblical theological survey of the role of proclamation in the Scriptures is important for understanding the centrality of the preached word in the world today. On the other hand the nature of the word preached will affect the way preaching is undertaken. This is where biblical theology should be no longer an

optional extra for enthusiasts, for it is the very heart of expository preaching.

There is a well-known adage that “a text without a context is a pretext.” But, what is the necessary context of any given text that prevents it from becoming a pretext? The evangelical doctrine of Scripture includes the unity of the Spirit-inspired testimony to the Christ within the whole canon. We should need to ask the question about context only to remind ourselves that it is a given. To ask about the context of a given text is to ask about its meaning; it is even to ask what we may legitimately designate by the “literal” meaning of the text. Francis Watson’s proposal merits consideration.⁴ He says the literal sense of the biblical texts comprises (1) verbal meaning (locution), (2) illocutionary and perlocutionary force, and (3) the relation to the center. For those unfamiliar with the terminology of speech-act theory, the first two relate to authorial intent, and the third to what Watson calls the “speech-act that lies at the centre of Christian scripture, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the enfleshment and the enactment of the divine Word.”⁵ Watson is thus happy to describe the incarnate Christ as the central speech-act of Scripture and the literal meaning of a text includes its relationship to him.

The answer we give to the question: “what do you think of the Christ?” will inevitably reflect our understanding of the unity of the Bible. Biblical Theology reminds us that the understanding of the whole is built up from the parts and, at the same time, the parts can only be fully understood as parts of the whole. Biblical theology, as I have thus far tried to define it, involves us in the two-fold exercise of analysis or exegesis of individual texts,

and the synthesis of the individual texts into a big picture or metanarrative. Once we accept the overall unity of the Bible we have to realize that every single text is in some way supported by every other text. No individual part of Scripture stands alone. The context of any text, which prevents its misuse, is the whole canon. This, in practical terms, does not mean that we have to be making explicit links from, say, a chosen text being preached, across to every other text. It would be impossible to do so. But it does mean that we will be aware that there are such links and that we need to explore the important paths that our text points us to. This is not merely the progression through texts from one part of Scripture in order to find its meaning in another. There is an interplay of texts that affects the meaning of all of them. Above all, the fact that Jesus is the center of Scripture and that he is the one Mediator between God and man, seems to me to indicate that the connection between texts, however far apart they are, is to be found by the relationship of each to the center, that is, to the Christ of the gospel.

Biblical theology provides the needed way of handling the contextual significance of the preacher’s chosen text. We should remind ourselves that the three dimensions of Scripture; the literary, the historical, and the theological, are inseparably interwoven. To deal with the literary qualities of the text apart from its place in the ongoing history of the saving acts of God will reduce it to a timeless platitude whose relationship to the Word of God is immediately jeopardized. It has been one of the features of modern hermeneutic confusion that the emphasis on the locus of meaning has shifted from theology to history and then to literature, as if these

were alternate possibilities instead of interdependent realities. Likewise, the movement of the hermeneutical focus from authorial intent, to autonomous text, and finally to the reader has also involved an “either-or” perspective, rather than a “both-and” perspective. It is one of the strengths of the adaptation of speech-act theory by a number of theologians including Kevin Vanhoozer, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Anthony Thiselton, that it has refocused the legitimate place of all three loci. Christians should be sensitive to the need to focus on all legitimate dimensions as interdependent and not treat one at the expense of the others. As I have already asserted, the doctrine of the Trinity and its correlate in the doctrine of the two natures of Christ should remind us that relationships exist as unity and distinction.

Biblical theology enables us to understand the biblical teaching on any given topic in a holistic way. We are not dependent on a few proof-texts for the establishment of a doctrine or for understanding the nature of some important concept. We can look at what lies behind the developed concept as we may have it in the New Testament, and ask what is really impelling it into the prominence it has. We can observe the various strands that give this doctrine its texture and its richness. We can then better evaluate the importance it should have in the contemporary church.

Here, then, is the challenge to the preacher who would be true to the biblical text so that the use of individual texts does not become a pretext. Preaching that uses a snippet of biblical text as a springboard for launching into a discourse on anything and everything other than what the text is really about in its own

context, is guilty of distorting the word and robbing it of its true saving power. It is a matter of concern that so many books on preaching seem to be mostly concerned with sermon craft, rhetoric, and communication. For some reason, the obvious perspective of the unity of the Bible, the overall message of biblical revelation, seems to become submerged under a mass of lesser concerns.

As I mentioned in my previous lecture, when I was researching my book *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* I was disappointed to find that, even among evangelical writers on preaching, the subject of biblical theology was rarely mentioned. In books dealing with the importance of expository preaching one might expect some emphasis on the need for a holistic approach to the biblical canon. I believe that it is the role of biblical theology to provide us with that perspective of the unified message of the Bible. In keeping with my stated preference for opening up any biblical topic using the method of biblical theology, I would have liked here to give a more detailed introduction to a biblical theology of preaching. This would be to deal with the theme of preaching or proclamation *in* the Bible rather than dealing with the matter of our preaching *from* the Bible. However, the two are closely related if distinguishable. A biblical theology of the theme of the word of God and its proclamation provides the structure and motive for applying the discipline of biblical theology more generally to the task of preaching.

In my previous lectures I have endeavored to show something of the structure of the metanarrative of Scripture. In essence it was described as the revelation of God’s kingdom, and of the way into it,

in three stages: the kingdom revealed in Israel's history; the kingdom revealed in prophetic eschatology; and the kingdom revealed as fulfilled in Christ. Each of these stages is related to the others, but in the end salvation is through Christ and him alone. This salvation is not merely the initial experience of conversion and the consequent hope of heaven. It also involves the whole process by which, during this life, God is conforming us through his word and Spirit more and more into the image of Christ, and the gift of perseverance by which he will bring us finally to glory. Thus, all proclamation, including that of the Old Testament, must somehow point people to Christ. Christian living and sanctification are motivated and structured by the gospel. In theological terms, our justification is the basis of our sanctification. Furthermore, the gospel of our justification establishes the pattern for eschatology. Just as the most important thing that is said about humanity in creation is in terms of our relationship to God as created in his image, so the most important thing that can be said about redeemed humanity in the regeneration is our relationship to Christ who is the true image of God. It is the role of biblical theology to uncover the relationship of every part of the Bible to Christ so that we can preach Christ from all of Scripture, and relate our redeemed humanity to Christ by means of every part of Scripture.

The preacher, then, seeks first to understand the text in itself by means of exegesis. But the task is not finished until that text, with all its detail, is related to the fulfillment it has in Christ. In this stage of exegesis one should not hurry on to Christ too quickly. To do so can lead to a superficial understanding of the text

which, in turn, will lead to a superficial understanding of the Christ to whom it points and testifies. In considering the task of preaching from the Old Testament we are led by the study of biblical theology to take account of the way that every event and person, every theological concept, somehow finds its fulfillment in Christ. To flesh out that rather extreme statement, let me propose the following Christological markers (each of which could be the subject of a separate lecture):

- (1) Christ is the God of the Old Testament who has now come in the flesh.
- (2) Christ is the true and faithful people of God.
- (3) Christ is the true Israel, the true Son of David, and thus the true Son of God.
- (4) Christ is, in his humanity, the new creation.
- (5) Christ is the prophet, priest, king, wise man, and faithful Israelite.
- (6) Christ is the new temple in which God dwells among his people.

Each of these points is, I believe, sustainable from the way the New Testament treats the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Christ. The dark side must also be recognized. If Jesus, "who knew no sin, was made sin for our sake," (2 Cor 5:21), then his act of vicarious sacrifice and atonement demonstrates to the fullest extent the seriousness of sin. In that sense he even functions as the antitype of creation's alienation from God.

All of these roles can be seen in the way the New Testament relates the Old Testament to Christ. This relationship is a two-way thing; we understand the New Testament only as the fulfillment of the Old. On the other hand the message of the New is that Jesus of Nazareth makes clear the full meaning of the Old. Thus, there is priority to the New for it brings to

us the revelation of God's final and fullest word which is Jesus.

Preachers who ignore these relationships or who avoid the task of trying to understand them, do so to their detriment. Those who work at understanding the Bible on its own terms will be rewarded over and over as people come alive to the proclamation of a Bible that is understandable in its one comprehensive message about God, his righteous judgment, his love for us in Christ, and the coming of his kingdom. Only by such a holistic exposition can we convey the necessity and nature of God's judgment to a skeptical world. When we apply biblical theology to preaching, and do so with prayerful humility before God, we may expect that the power of the gospel to convert and to change people's lives will be most evident.

Having said all that, I need to point out that the place of biblical theology in expository preaching is not always agreed upon or understood by evangelicals. I believe one main reason for this is the fluid nature of biblical-theological study and the lack of consensus about what it entails. Recently I have received emails from a young pastor in the Netherlands, a pastor of a Flemish church in Belgium, a pastor from a large church in Illinois, and a former student now ministering in an Anglican Church in Sydney's west. The first three of these echoed matters that some Moore College students brought to my attention soon after I returned to teach there in 1995. The gist of the common problem raised was that certain difficulties arise from the application of my biblical theological perspective to the Old Testament as a means of finding the significance of the text in relation to Jesus. Exposition of the Old Testament

text inevitably seemed to be a precursor to a predictable and almost stereotyped application. This was variously described as: "Ho-hum! Here comes the Jesus bit," or "So now we can say 'Hooray for Jesus.'" My former student told me that some time ago he had preached on 1 Samuel 17 giving a biblical-theological account of the significance of David slaying Goliath. Subsequently, an elderly retired minister in the congregation indicated some disquiet about the way the sermon had been handled. The matter he raised was the old controversy between exemplary preaching as against a redemptive-historical approach. Specifically, he suggested that Hebrews 11 gave grounds for emphasizing David's faith as an example to us, rather than the redemptive-historical perspective on David as a type of Christ, our substitute redeemer. However, I do not believe that a careful reading of Hebrews 11 does lead us to that conclusion in view of the qualifications made in vv. 13-16 and 39-40. In any case it is not a bland "either-or" situation. My correspondent referred to the retired man's view that biblical theology was the scourge of the recent crop of students graduating from Moore College!

The question of the problem of all Old Testament sermons ending up with the same platitudes about trusting Jesus is important. If that is what happens, then there is something seriously wrong. Since Jesus and the apostles testify to the fact that the Old Testament is a book about Christ we must be careful to understand what it is saying before running too quickly to the New Testament and finding a superficial or stereotyped fulfillment in Christ. The Reformers were clear that the foundations of Christology were to be found in the Old Testament. On this

basis they could speak of Jesus in terms of his role as prophet, priest, and king. To these I would add the role of wise man, although wisdom could be subsumed under the fulfillment of Davidic (and Solomonic) kingship. I have already alluded in my first lecture to my understanding of Christ as the one who reconnects all things in himself. The great cosmic passages such as Eph 1:10 and Col 1:15-20 are important here. I will not repeat what I have already said. I want only to emphasize that there is a great deal more to Jesus than his being the Son of God who died on the cross for our sins. Our Christology as it comes out in our preaching should reflect every aspect of reality that is dealt with in both Old and New Testaments.

Biblical Theology in Christian Education

Biblical theology involves “big picture” Bible reading. The canon is the ultimate context that provides the hermeneutical framework for any text of the Bible. As I have already indicated, biblical theology should aim to uncover and show the inter-connectedness of all parts of the Bible. My experience is that adults, many who have been Christians for a long time, express some amazement that they have never seen or been shown this macro-structure of revelation before. Certainly a lot of published curricula for teachers of children and young people seem to major on fragmentary approaches to the Bible. One of the prime reasons for teaching adults to become mature in their understanding of the Bible is that most of them sooner or later will have some teaching role, if not in Sunday Schools and youth groups, then as parents of their own children. In my opinion, no person should be assigned to teach the

Bible in church groups unless they have read and understood some basic biblical theology. Ideally, they should have undergone some more formal instruction in biblical theology. Pastors also have a responsibility to see that Sunday school curricula and teaching materials used for all age groups are at least gospel-based and Christ-centred. But, I would argue for more. We need Christian education curricula and courses for all ages that enable the learners to grasp the sense of the one complete and integrated message of Scripture.

One of the difficulties we face is created by who we are as evangelicals. We believe passionately in the need for people, young and old, to make a personal response of faith to the gospel, and to maintain that commitment of faith to their life’s end. Some evangelicals tend to assume that the task of any and every session of Bible teaching is not completed until some kind of imperatival application and even appeal has been made.

Let me clarify this. I am certainly not opposed to application since every part of the Bible certainly applies to us. “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). It is the question of how it applies that is the issue. Over the years that I have listened to Bible talks and group discussions, I have noticed that a certain perspective almost always seems to predominate. After some brief attempt to understand what the passage is saying, the questions frequently asked first are “how does this apply to us?”; “what does this teach us about ourselves?”; or, “what is God saying to me?” But, it seems to me

that this is to jump the gun and, to mix the metaphors, to be in danger of short-circuiting the texts.

Let me put it another way. Grammatically, the biblical material is cast in two main modes: the indicative and the imperative. Biblical narrative is essentially indicative, that is, it is a telling of what is (or was). One of the prevalent errors in much Christian writing and preaching is to simply turn indicatives into imperatives. This is done in the interests of relevance and personal involvement. But the Bible presents very clear distinctions between indicatives and imperatives. The gospel is indicative. The call to repentance and faith is imperative. How we live as Christians is the imperative, of which the New Testament contains much. But the imperatives, the “oughts” of the Christian life, spring from the indicatives of the gospel. Of course, even imperatives can be misapplied when taken out of context. The application of the Sinai law is an obvious case.

The classic evangelical piety that wants to leap from the narrative immediately to the imperatives usually manages to short-circuit the text so that the biblical road from, say, an Old Testament narrative to us bypasses the central indicative which is Christ. At best, this fails to show the genuine connection between text and hearer. At worst, it results in moralizing, distorted pietism, and even gross legalism. Thus, the first question that I believe we should ask when it comes to the matter of applying the text is not “What does this tell us about ourselves?” but “What does this tell us about Christ?”

I want to make a brief comment about biblical theology and young people. Developmental psychologists may tell us

that young children find abstract concepts difficult to assimilate. The retired minister that I referred to earlier, who criticized the David and Goliath sermon, had spent most of his ministry dealing with Christian education for young people. He felt that children find the biblical theological approach too abstract, whereas using David directly and fully in exemplary fashion (with all the “incidentals”) is more concrete. I respect this man’s experience, but I think he has really not understood what biblical theology is about. For children, the telling of the biblical narrative should be just that. There is nothing abstract about telling the stories of what God has done. Furthermore, exhorting children to have faith without coming to the point of what the object of that faith is, is about as abstract as you could get! I am confident that, had the sermon in question been delivered to children, the approach would have been appropriately geared to the younger audience.

The teenage years are crucial for the formation of mature, adult views of life and faith. While it may be important to treat matters in a more problem-centred way, the last thing Christian high school students need is mere legalism or a mystical relation with Jesus. Problem-based studies dealing with relationships, sexuality, drugs, social justice, environment and the like, need a biblical-theological underpinning so that it becomes second nature to search for the Christian position as one that is implicated by the gospel. The alternative is to provide pat, ready-made answers supported by proof texts and in isolation from the solutions to other problems. Not only is this spoon-feeding approach misleading, it does not help the students learn how to use the Bible for themselves. To teach biblical

theology is to teach people to read the Bible intelligently.

Biblical Theology in the Christian Home

While there are some obvious differences between the Christian home and the local church, there are also some important similarities. Most Christian parents, I think, would recognize the duty they have to extend the ministry of the church into their home-life in matters of leadership and spiritual nurture. Whether we operate in a baptistic or a paedobaptist-covenantal framework is, in my opinion, not the ultimately significant thing. Evangelicals of both persuasions agree on this: that the child of a Christian home is a gift of God to the parents who have the privilege and responsibility to make the person and work of Christ real to that child. Blended with the normal parental love and nurture will be prayer, a progressive instruction in the word of God, and reliance on the Holy Spirit to apply God's word.

Unfortunately, we have not always been well served in children's literature. This situation is sometimes reflected in the curricula produced for Sunday Schools. In my experience two main problems characterized a lot of material for young people. The first was fragmentation so that there was little sense of the unity of the biblical story. The second was the constant style of application. If it wasn't repetitiously evangelistic, it was moralistic and thus verging on legalism. I know this is a gross generalization, and I can only speak out of my own limited experience. Years ago I started saying that we really need a good biblical theology written for children. I knew I was not a children's writer although from time to

time I was urged to give it a go. Recently an excellent work for young children has appeared from Crossway in Wheaton. This is David Helm's *The Big Picture Story Bible*.⁶

There is one aspect of teaching the Bible in the Christian home that I believe needs to be emphasized. The strategy of application in the home should not be the same as the strategy at an evangelistic meeting or in the weekly sermon. I sometimes think that evangelicals are lacking in confidence in the power of the word to do its work. It seems to me that it is more important to allow the teaching of the Bible to build a sense of the narrative that leads to Jesus, than to be constantly trying to find an immediate personal application every time the Bible is opened or a Bible story told. Constant application easily leads to the child believing that this Christian faith stuff is all about what he or she must do. The missing focus is often the sense that this is what God has done. What God has done should take priority. It must do, for until there is a sense of what God has done any application in terms of what we must do will be warped and corrupted. At the evangelistic level, there is no point in telling children, or adults, that they need to trust in Jesus until we have told them what that means, why they need to, who Jesus is and what he has done to make him worth trusting.

The Pastor as a Biblical Theologian

I believe people in churches have the right to expect their pastors to be both godly and competent in theology. Just what criteria they have to assess such competency would vary a great deal from church to church and from person to person. It is not too much to suppose that good theological training will find

expression as professional competence in the way the pastor preaches, teaches, evangelizes, counsels, and answers difficult questions. The pastor who has been tuned to biblical theology will, I believe, have the potential to give better leadership in some important areas. I would like to suggest at least five areas in which biblical theology might be seen as integral to a soundly biblical pastoral practice.⁷

First, biblical theology is integral to, and helps promote, a high view of the Bible. This for many people means a high doctrine of Scripture, perhaps in terms of the supreme authority of the inspired and infallible texts. Certainly, the supreme authority of the Bible over tradition and reason is a generally accepted mark of evangelicalism. By a high view of the Bible, I mean that once the chosen doctrinal terminology concerning the nature and authority of the Bible has been duly considered and installed, this will be employed self-consciously and with intent as the touchstone of all faith and practice. Biblical theology can play a significant role in this.

To begin with, biblical theology, by exposing the inner structure of biblical revelation becomes the source of an ongoing adventure in discovering new ways that the texts are interconnected. The interconnectedness of texts is what gives them meaning. The more we understand the structure of Scripture, the better able we will be to find our own place within the biblical story.⁸ That is to be well on the way to making valid interpretations of the way particular texts apply to us. Quite simply, if we can see how any text relates to Jesus Christ then, since we also study to know how the people of God relate to him, we can grow in understanding of how the text relates to us through

Christ the mediator. One of the greatest antidotes to destructive critical views is the biblical-theological perspective on the coherence of the whole canon. To take one example: In the 1980s a prominent Anglican bishop called into question the orthodox Christian doctrine of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He was quoted as saying that we did not need a “knock-down” miracle to impress us. If, as it seems, he was implying that Christians saw the resurrection purely as a story calculated to impress unbelievers, then he totally missed the point. Biblical theology helps us to see the connection between all the promises of God to Israel, and Jesus in his resurrection.

Second, biblical theology promotes a high Christology. This is to approach the question, “What do you think of the Christ; whose Son is he?” When Hans Küng, the rather unconventional Roman Catholic theologian, wrote his book *On Being a Christian*, he asked a pointed and disturbing question: “which Christ?”⁹ Which Christ do we proclaim and worship? Is it the Christ of popular piety, the Christ who requires us to approach him through his mother, the Christ of dogma, the Christ of the enthusiasts, or the Christ of literature? There are two main ways to pursue the subject of Christology that, I believe, are complementary. The one is a biblical-theological approach, and the other is a dogmatic approach. Both are necessary, but the need for a thoroughgoing biblical-theological approach is not always appreciated at the level of pastoral ministry. It is important that people know something of the one they are being exhorted to put their trust in. Have we not all at some time heard the “evangelistic” sermon that calls on people to come to Jesus without having given the slightest

indication as to why and on what basis? When biblical theology shows us how all the great themes about God, his people, and the promises are gathered together in Christ, then faith in Christ takes on a meaning that is all too rarely attained.

Third, biblical theology promotes a high view of the gospel. Very early in the history of the church, the loss of the objective and historic gospel went hand in hand with the loss of the historical and natural meaning of the Old Testament. Catholicism developed on the back of a biblical theology heavily slanted towards the allegorical interpretation of Scripture. Both Catholicism and allegorical interpretation involved the de-historicizing of the gospel. The Reformation re-historicized both the gospel and the Old Testament. The prime focus recovered in the Reformation was the justification of the sinner on the basis of the objective, historical work of Christ *for* us. Catholicism had reversed the vision so that the prime focus was on the work of Christ, or his Spirit, *within* us. This meant the reversal of the relationship of sanctification to justification. Infused grace, beginning with baptismal regeneration, internalized the gospel, and made sanctification the basis of justification. This is an upside-down gospel.

The attempts of the Antiochenes to keep an historical and typological hermeneutic to the fore largely failed to take hold in the medieval church. Thus, the historical acts of God in the Old Testament were allegorized into being something other than the typological and historical antecedents to the historical gospel. Many evangelicals, I fear, are more Catholic than Protestant in that the main focus of the gospel is seen to be “Jesus living in my heart.” This is the Roman Catholic *infused grace* all over

again with the same results. Assurance of salvation is seen to be based on the subjective experience of sanctification, and is, thus, eroded if not completely destroyed.

I am asserting that the loss of a robust biblical theology from our evangelical preaching and teaching leads to a blurring of the gospel. The important biblical doctrine of the new birth of the believer has often been hijacked from its biblical-theological context and transformed to become the essential gospel. In practice, much evangelical ministry concentrates more on what God can do in our lives now, at the expense of what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Of course both are valid aspects of the biblical teaching, but it is the perspective of the relationship of the two that becomes distorted.

Fourth, biblical theology promotes a high view of the ministerial task. It is to be regretted that many ministers find themselves overworked, under-funded, under constant pressure to conform to the preconceived ideas about the minister and his role, and burdened with expectations of success rather than faithfulness. The result is that many ministers become pragmatic and driven by the search for the next program that will bring people through the doors on a Sunday. There is no more potent antidote to pragmatism than the reinforcing of the truth that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. I want to be bold here and claim that biblical theology can have real and observable effects in our lives and ministries. In the first place, biblical theology will help the minister to be clear as to what the gospel is that *is* God’s power for salvation. Understanding the breadth of the biblical view of salvation will help prevent the harassed pastor from

being side-tracked into the wrong kind of success.

A biblical-theological focus is a key antidote to distorted perspectives in that it contextualizes texts that might otherwise be taken out of context. Unfortunately, the minister who strives for this focus will often meet opposition because it will mean dealing with distinctions within the broader unity. Popular opinion does not like fine distinctions, even if important. Thus, if one suggests that something which is good has usurped the place of something better, or the best, one is likely to be accused of rejecting the good thing altogether.

Any minister struggles with the need to establish priorities for time and tasks. Ministers are increasingly expected to be efficient and effective CEOs of fairly complex local church organizations. Once again pragmatism easily takes over. Without in any way trivializing the problems, we recognize that the office of pastor-teacher is first and foremost the office of theologian. The role of biblical theology in this relates to the fact that it interacts with the necessary abstractions of systematic theology, or church doctrine, and ties them to the history of redemption and of the people of God. In practical terms, biblical theology resonates with the reading and expository preaching from the Bible week by week, and with people's reading of the Bible at home. Ministers need to carry with them the biblical doctrine of doctrine. Biblical theology is the bridge between text and doctrine and keeps it from being abstract. Both the minister and his people need the perspective that we together are heirs to the whole wonderful process of salvation-history that culminates in Jesus Christ. This is what makes the ministerial task worth doing.

Fifth, biblical theology promotes a high view of the people of God. Christians need a biblical anthropology as well as a biblical ecclesiology in order to resist the tendency to the self-centeredness of our sinful nature. Evangelicalism was afflicted by nineteenth century individualism, which has ripened into post-modern subjectivism. A biblical-theological survey of the theme of the people of God builds up a sound Christology and a realistic anthropology. The people of God are defined by their union with Christ, a union that in turn is defined by who and what Christ is. Only in a secondary way are we defined by our relationship to the great heroes of faith in the Bible. That is why their relationship to Christ is so important to the interpretation of the narratives in which they figure.

When we start to lose sight of this biblical perspective, it is easy to downgrade the people of God in our churches into the core membership of an organization. They are perceived in practice as financial supporters of the institution and the voluntary helpers in a multitude of activities, some good, some indifferent, some inimical to the gospel. Let pastor and people study the great themes of the people of God through the method of biblical theology. Let them ponder the wonder of it all, that the process that began with Adam and Eve and which is consummated in the visions of the book of Revelation of the people of God worshipping before the throne of God and the Lamb, is really and truly the same process into which our local church is caught up.

A biblical theology of the people of God will include a biblical theology of the church. This is too big a subject to do more in this lecture than simply indicate that it is there and needs attention. At the

very least it is important as an antidote to the rampant individualism and subjectivism of our time. But, the doctrine of the church is not only a matter of a corporate sense of being in Christ, it is also a matter of being in the world. When, for example, the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation are treated as separate from the rest of the book, as is often done in series of sermons and Bible studies, the significance of the seven churches of Asia Minor is largely lost. When the book is taken as a whole, and provided it is not done with an exclusively futurist perspective, then we learn that the ordinary, small, unremarkable, congregations, as much as any other, are in the front line of God's action in this world to redeem and judge the whole universe.

Biblical theology in the church must begin in the pastor's study. Above all, biblical theology involves a way of thinking about how one uses and applies the Bible. It is a way of thinking that needs to be cultivated about all the issues of pastoral ministry. It is a method of approach to almost any matter that confronts us in ministry. It is a way of training ourselves in theological reflection that will pay handsome dividends if we persevere. Often there are no clear doctrinal formulations to assist us in facing certain issues, and we are left with a few Bible verses that might spring to mind, along with a certain amount of experience-based wisdom. It is in such cases that biblical theology comes into its own. Whatever the subject—prayer, guidance or knowing the will of God, assurance, the fulfilment of prophecy, secular powers, miracles, Israel and the Palestinians, social justice, suffering, the Sabbath, leadership, life after death, church and denominations, and the whole range of

ethical issues—biblical theology provides a strategy for investigation. It enables us to make progress on subjects that do not turn up in concordances (because they do not involve any single and obvious biblical word), nor in handbooks of doctrine (because they are not perceived to be central matters of doctrine).

Summary Conclusions: Biblical Theology in Our Post-Modern World

In this series of lectures, I have tried to do several things. First of all, I wanted to give attention to the nature of biblical theology and the necessity for it to be part of every Christian's equipment for life and ministry in the world. In my second lecture, I turned attention to the academy, particularly to those seminaries and colleges concerned with ministerial training. For whatever reason, and however it is justified, the lack of introductory courses in biblical theology in, so it would seem, the majority of such institutions is to be regretted. It may betray in some cases tardiness in facing the realities of our modern and postmodern societies and in changing our understanding of the kind of curriculum needed to address those realities. In other cases it may show that the theoretical aspects of the essence and method of biblical theology are still so diffuse that it gets left in the "too hard" basket. In this third lecture, I have tried to address the matter of ministry in the front line: preaching and pastoral care, Christian education, and one of the most important of all, the ministry of Christian parents to their children.

These three aspects, the theoretical foundations, the formal instruction in the Christian academy, and the ministry in the church and in the Christian home,

are all inter-related. If ministry in the local church is mediocre, it will breed mediocrity in those that seek to enter ministry. It will encourage mediocrity in the home ministry. The evangelical academy is more likely to have entry requirements that include consideration of the academic ability of the applicant, indications of ministry gifts, and proof of spiritual maturity. One advantage of a denominational structure is that it is likely to have resources to facilitate the business of encouraging interest in full-time ministry and in laying down criteria for acceptance into the seminary. However, non-denominational organizations can also make effective contributions to the promotion of ministry training.

It is because of the inter-relationship of the church, the home, and the academy that what happens in one will affect what happens in the others. Twenty years ago Scott Hafemann issued a warning in an article entitled "Seminary, Subjectivity, and the Centrality of Scripture: Reflections on the Current Crisis in Evangelical Seminary Education."¹⁰ I suspect the problems of modernity affecting evangelical thinking have only intensified in this postmodern age. Hafemann noted, after J. D. Hunter, that many evangelical leaders were participating in the prevailing culture of "modernity," that evangelicals responded to the challenge to their identity by trying to bend without breaking, and that evangelicals had become their own worst enemy. This latter was seen in the move first to de-objectivization and then to subjectivization. This leads to evangelicals doubting the importance of serious exegesis of the biblical text:

Thus because what one "feels" about the Bible and God is now culturally supported it can easily be wedded with one's subjective experience as

the primary source of certitude for liberals and the growing source of certitude for evangelicals.¹¹

He goes on to point to an emerging theological support for evangelical unwillingness to put in the hard effort in exegesis of the text, a theology strikingly similar to classical liberalism. This includes the idea that a personal relationship with Christ lessens the need to look at Scripture historically, the borrowed charismatic pneumatology that the Spirit becomes the only exegete we need, and the transferring of the locus of revelation from the Bible to experience.¹²

Others have been sounding similar warnings on a broader front of evangelical religion. Many will be familiar with David Wells's books *No Place for Truth*, and *God in the Wasteland*. In a recent essay "The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World," part of a volume by the same name, Wells points to the postmodern ethos as including removal of a transcendent God and revelation in favor of spirituality without religion and which is entirely from within and directed to the self. In the face of this and of the threats posed by global terrorism, Wells comments that "Evangelicalism, now much absorbed by the arts and tricks of marketing, is simply not very serious anymore."¹³

It would be fatuous to claim that the whole answer to the evangelical malaise is biblical theology. On the other hand, I do not really think we can avoid the disasters that Wells and Hafemann warn of without a return to serious exegesis of the biblical text. Hafemann sees part of the difficulty for the seminary to be persuading the incoming students that Greek and Hebrew and close attention to the exegetical task are important when

this is so foreign to both the secular climate and the ethos of much evangelicalism. As Geerhardus Vos defined biblical theology as a part of exegetical theology, I would perhaps reverse the order. Either way, they belong together. Exegesis is not complete until the significance of the passage is seen in relation to the whole story, and thus to Christ.

I believe it is true to say that what starts in the academy may take a generation or more to filter to the level of the layperson in the local church. The tragedy of this becomes clear when Bible-believing Christians suddenly find themselves at the mercy of a rampant liberal in their pulpit. However, the seminary and Bible college can also influence things for reform and for an increase in biblical ministry. The task is not easy, especially if the youth of our churches are imbibing a culture and world-view that is alien to Christianity. Wells is right to see the problem as a clash of worldviews. But if he and Hafemann are right in their analysis, the task is great. It is not only introductory courses of biblical theology in the seminary that we need. The need is also great for the biblical theologians to work with the historians and dogmatists to hammer out the viable methods and procedures so that biblical theology will have some recognizable theoretical basis that stems from divine revelation in Scripture.

I conclude on this note: The gospel is about objective historical events, not about subjective experience and ideals. Subjective experience, to be valid, must be the fruit of the gospel. The gospel is about the transcendent God of creation doing something to rectify the corrupted history of mankind, not about a self-centered technique of personal self-improvement.

The good news is that the Man from heaven has re-written our personal histories so that what counts before God is that when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, God made us alive with Christ, raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in heavenly places (Eph 2:5-6). The cancer of subjectivism that threatens the very existence of true biblical religion is not new; it is as old as Adam's rebellion. But, the remedy must at the very least involve a determined return to the historic and objective gospel as the only basis for a true spiritual subjectivity.

The gospel is above all a sovereign work of our God with consequences for eternity that were planned from before the foundation of the world. Whatever the human dimensions in the resurgence of biblical theology, the divine dimension is the indispensable cause of all that is good. If the quest for a viable, legitimate, and consequential biblical theology is of God, then our responsibility as academics and Christian pastors is great indeed. The discipline of biblical theology will only prosper and bear fruit in the church if we, the theologians, repent for past omissions and pray for the Spirit of God to do a powerful work and to revive his word among us and in this needy world.

ENDNOTES

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

²Klaas Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983), 1, quoting P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907).

³Peter Adam, "Preaching and Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical*

Theology (ed. T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 104.

⁴Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 123.

⁵Ibid., 121.

⁶David Helm, *The Big Picture Story Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

⁷See my essay, "The Pastor as Biblical Theologian," in *Interpreting God's Plan: Biblical Theology and the Pastor* (ed. R. J. Gibson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 110-29.

⁸See Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

⁹Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (Glasgow: Collins, 1974), 126-44.

¹⁰Scott Hafemann, "Seminary, Subjectivity, and the Centrality of Scripture: Reflections on the Current Crisis in Evangelical Seminary Education," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31, no. 2 (1988).

¹¹Ibid, 137.

¹²Ibid, 138-40.

¹³David Wells, "The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World," in *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World* (ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 23.