

Editorial: Reflections on the Significance of Biblical Theology

STEPHEN J. WELLUM

Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and editor of *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He received his Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he is the author of numerous essays and articles and the co-author of *Kingdom through Covenant* (Crossway, 2012) and *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Crossway, 2015), and the co-editor of *Building on the Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Crossway, 2015 with Gregg Allison), and *Progressive Covenantalism* (B&H, 2016 with Brent Parker).

In recent years, “biblical theology” as a discipline has grown in evangelical theology which has resulted in positive results. However, there are still differences in regard to its definition and why it is important. Since this issue of *SBJT* is devoted to the larger topic of biblical theology and various themes within it, it may be helpful first to explain what I think biblical theology is and its significance for our doing theology.

At the popular level, when most Christians think of “biblical theology” they understand it to be “true to the Bible” in our teaching and theology. To be “biblical” in this sense is certainly what all Christians desire, but this is *not* how I am using the term. To be more precise, let me contrast how “biblical theology” has been understood since the Reformation, especially contrasting a major non-evangelical use of the term from an evangelical, orthodox use.

In and after the Reformation, biblical theology was often identified more or less with systematic theology as the church sought to understand the entirety of Scripture and to grasp how the whole canon is put together in light of Christ. However, there was a tendency to read Scripture in more

logical and atemporal categories rather than to think carefully through the Bible's developing storyline. With the rise of the Enlightenment though, biblical theology began to emerge as a distinct discipline. But it is crucial to distinguish the emergence of biblical theology in the Enlightenment along two different paths: one, an illegitimate path tied to Enlightenment presuppositions, and the other, a legitimate path tied to the Bible's own self-attestation and presentation of itself.

In regard to the illegitimate Enlightenment path, there was a growing tendency to read Scripture *critically* and thus uncoupled from historic Christianity. This resulted in approaching the Bible "as any other book," rooted in history but unfortunately, also open to historical-critical methods which viewed the Bible within the confines of *methodological* naturalism. This meant that the Bible was not approached on its own terms, i.e., as God's Word written. Instead, the idea that Scripture is God-breathed through human authors—a text which authoritatively and accurately unfolds God's redemptive plan centered in Christ—was rejected. The end result of this approach was both a denial of a high view of Scripture and an increasingly fragmented reading of Scripture, given the fact that the practitioners of this view did not believe Scripture to be a unified, God-given revelation. Biblical theology as a discipline became merely "descriptive" and governed by *critical* methods and unbiblical worldview assumptions. "Diversity" was emphasized more than "unity" in Scripture, and ultimately, as a discipline which sought to grasp God's unified plan, it failed. In the twentieth century, there were some attempts to overcome the Enlightenment straightjacket on Scripture, but none of these attempts produced a "whole Bible theology" because, given their view of Scripture and theology, very few of them believed that Scripture taught a unified message.

Contrary to the Enlightenment approach, a legitimate and biblical approach to biblical theology emerged which was grounded in orthodox Christian theology, a high view of Scripture, and reading Scripture along its unfolding storyline. Probably the best-known twentieth century pioneer of this approach was Geerhardus Vos who developed biblical theology at Princeton Seminary in the early twentieth century. Vos sought to do biblical theology with a firm commitment to the authority of Scripture. In contrast to the Enlightenment view, Vos argued that biblical theology, as an exegetical discipline, must not only begin with the biblical text but must also view

Scripture as God's own self-attesting Word, fully authoritative, and reliable. Furthermore, as one exegetes Scripture, Vos argued, biblical theology seeks to trace out the Bible's unity and multiformity and find its consummation in the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant era. Biblical theology must follow a method that reads the Bible on its own terms, following the Bible's own internal contours and shape, in order to discover God's unified plan as it is disclosed to us over time. The path that Vos blazed was foundational for much of the resurgence of biblical theology within evangelicalism today.

Following this evangelical view, Brian Rosner offers a helpful definition of "biblical theology:" Biblical theology is "theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus" (*New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Intervarsity Press, 2000, 10). In this definition, Rosner emphasizes some important points crucial to the nature and task of biblical theology. Biblical theology is concerned with the overall message of the whole Bible. It seeks to understand the parts in relation to the whole. As an exegetical method, it is sensitive to literary, historical, and theological dimensions of Scripture, as well as to the interrelationships between earlier and later texts in Scripture. Furthermore, biblical theology is not merely interested in words and word studies but also in concepts and themes as it traces out the Bible's own storyline, on the Bible's own terms, as the plot line reaches its culmination in Christ.

With these points in mind, what, then, is biblical theology? It is best viewed as a *hermeneutical* discipline which seeks to do justice to what Scripture claims to be and what it actually is. In regard to its claim, Scripture is *God's* Word written, and as such, it is a unified revelation of his gracious plan of redemption. In terms of what it actually is, it is a *progressive* unfolding of God's plan, rooted in history, and unpacked along a specific redemptive-historical plot line primarily demarcated by biblical covenants. Biblical theology as a hermeneutical discipline attempts to exegete texts in their own context and then, in light of the entire canon, to examine the unfolding nature of God's plan and carefully think through the relationship between *before* and *after* in that plan which culminates in Christ. As such, biblical theology provides the

basis for understanding how texts in one part of the Bible relate to all other texts so that they will be read correctly, according to God's intention, which is discovered through human authors but ultimately at the canonical level. In the end, biblical theology is the attempt to unpack the "whole counsel of God" and "to think God's thoughts after him."

Why is biblical theology important for the church? For this reason: biblical theology provides the basis and underpinning for all systematic theology and doctrinal formulation. At its heart, theology is seeking to understand and apply the entire Bible to our lives. It is seeking to think through all that Scripture teaches and then rightly drawing the correct conclusions for our thinking and lives. Given this fact, then one cannot do this properly without doing biblical theology first. Although theology also inevitably involves theological construction, for it to be *biblical*, it must be warranted by the entirety of Scripture. This is why systematic theology as the discipline which attempts "to bring our entire thought captive to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:1-5) must be rooted and grounded in biblical theology.

It is for this reason that we have devoted this issue to various topics and themes of biblical theology. Ultimately, we cannot draw proper conclusions from Scripture until we first see how the whole Bible understands the various issues discussed by each of our authors. It is my prayer that this issue of *SBJT* will help us better know Scripture, and rightly apply Scripture in our theological proposals so that we learn anew to live under the Lordship of Christ for the glory of God and the good of the church.