

Biblical Theology, I

The Old Testament was well known to Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke, we read that when He walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, He said to them, almost with a display of a bit of impatience, “This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything must be fulfilled that was written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. And then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”

Those verses from Luke 24 are very good connective verses between the Old and New Testaments. Jesus, who introduces the New Testament, tells us that He is one of the main subjects—in fact, the central figure—of the Old Testament, and I trust that we will see this as we go through this course in biblical theology.

Since this is a course in biblical theology, we should first of all try to define what we mean by biblical theology. There are many books on the subject. In fact, I have about twenty-five books on my desk that all claim to be the theology of the Old Testament and New Testament and it’s amazing how differently biblical theology is defined in a number of these. Philip Watson wrote an article in *The Expository Times* some time ago in which he laid out three views and he was very positive in rejecting a number of them. The first view he rejected was the liberal approach, which says that the Bible contains religious writings that present ideas about God, the Creator, who was holy and righteous and commanded people to love one another. In the liberal view, biblical theology has only a descriptive task. It simply describes what ideas about God are in the Bible. The Bible is a record of ancient beliefs, not a revelation. Some biblical theologians approach the Bible that way, but Philip Watson rejects that approach.

Watson then talks about the fundamentalist approach to biblical theology. The fundamentalists believe that the Bible is verbally inspired. It’s a record of God’s revelation in word and deed, inerrant in every part. This position, he says, rests on a dogmatism that must be completely and utterly rejected. According to Watson, biblical theology is impossible if we take this fundamentalist approach to the Scriptures. (I hope to show that he is very incorrect about this.)

The third approach Watson talks about is the Christocentric approach. Like the liberal approach, it sees the Bible as a record of belief—the belief of the Israelites that they had a special relationship to God, and the belief of the New Testament church that they replaced the Israelites in that relationship. The Old Testament records promises concerning Jesus Christ to come and the New Testament shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of those promises.

There is something rather appealing about Watson’s presentation of the Christocentric approach, but although he centers on Christ, he refuses to accept the Bible as an infallible record of revelation. The Old Testament records a whole series of beliefs concerning the Christ and amazingly, many of those beliefs of the Old Testament proved to be correct, as Jesus Himself said. But Philip Watson’s approach to biblical theology is to read the Old Testament and the New Testament as a record of the Christ as He was believed in by Israel and the church. His definition of biblical theology, then, is “speech about God.” Biblical theology is what one thinks and says about God. It is a scientific discipline, it is purely descriptive, and it fulfills a normative role on behalf of dogmatic theology. So if we were to follow Philip Watson, we would simply describe what people thought and said concerning Christ in the Old and New Testaments.

Frank Anderson, a very learned evangelical scholar in the Anglican world in Australia, has written an article in the *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (volume 2, page 63) in which he describes what he considers

biblical theology to be. His description is much better than Watson's and I would urge you, if you are able, to pick up that encyclopedia and read what he has to say.

William Dyrness, a missionary teacher in the Far East, describes biblical theology as a study of themes. Dyrness is an evangelical scholar who accepts the veracity of the Scriptures, but his book is almost like a systematic study. He explains the major themes of the Bible and if you look at his index, you will find that he deals with revelation, the self-revelation of God, the nature of God, creation, providence, man and woman, sin, the covenant, the law, worship, piety, ethics. It almost sounds like a systematic theology, which, as you know, deals first of all with revelation, then God, then man, then Christ and then salvation.

George Ladd, in one of the books we are using for this course, notes that biblical theology has to deal with history. You cannot do a study in biblical theology properly unless you give specific attention to history. On page 25, he says, "Biblical theology is that discipline which sets forth the message of the books of the Bible in their historical setting." He is very correct. We must look at the historical setting of each aspect of God's revelation in the Bible.

For Ladd, biblical theology is primarily a descriptive discipline. Remember that Philip Watson said this as well. This means that Ladd and Watson see biblical theology as not being concerned with the final meaning of the teachings of the Bible or their relevance for today; that is the task of systematic theology. Here's where I would part company with my good friend, George Ladd, because I think that to teach this course, I'm going to have to give you the meaning and some significance for today as well as what the Bible meant for them back then. But on the whole, Ladd's book is a book worth having on your shelves for New Testament theology.

Finally, we have Gerhardus Vos, the man who introduced me to biblical theology. I wish that he had learned his theology in the English language. Unfortunately for us, he did most of his study in German Dutch settings and one of the sayings amongst the German and the Dutch is, "If I can say it a complex way, why should I say it in a simple way?"

This book contains three sets of lectures that Dr. Vos gave in the 1920s at Princeton Theological Seminary. The first section deals with the Mosaic revelation, the second section deals with the prophetic revelation, and the third section deals with Jesus and the Gospels. The book is not a complete biblical theology, but Vos has set forth a good case for how we should understand and approach biblical theology.

On pages five through nine, he presents his case. On page five, Vos writes, "Biblical theology is that branch of exegetical theology which deals with the processes of self-revelation of God." And then he uses a unique verb, "deposited," in the Bible. Now some people have quibbled about that term, "deposited," like you to go the bank and deposit some money in your account. I'm not going to argue about that. Vos spoke in 1920 and maybe the term "deposited" had a little less of a commercial connotation then than it does now. He surely believed that the Bible was the record of God's infallible revelation to us as He revealed Himself in word and deed. This was recorded and this is what the Scriptures are about.

This process, according to Vos, has to be understood as having four main features. I don't want you in any way to miss them. The first of the four features is the historic, progressive character of the revelation process. By this he means that revelation was a process that moved through history. The Scriptures did

not drop readymade from heaven. God revealed Himself progressively in the Scriptures from the time of creation until 100 A.D.

The second main feature of this process of revelation is that it is embodied in history. You may recall that Ladd said that we must consider very carefully the historical dimension of revelation. God never made Himself known by word or deed outside of history. God always condescended. God always came to man. He came to Adam in the garden before sin. He walked with him. He came to Adam after sin. God came to Cain, the murderer. God came to Noah. He came to Abram, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, the children of Israel, Joshua. God came to them as they were agents in history. God never separated His people from the mainstream of history. God didn't take people out of history. He came into history. He left His people right where they were as He came to them to speak to them and to deal with them. And so His revelation is always embodied in history.

Now one of the things that has disturbed me very much in the course of my studies in the evangelical Reformed context is that many, many writers have gone to the Bible and have thought that if they did a simple grammatical study, looking at the Hebrew and Greek grammar, that would suffice for interpretation and they would have no need to pay attention to the historical setting in which the text was first given. However, it is very difficult to make your message meaningful and significant for the modern audience to whom you are preaching if you don't first understand the meaning and significance of the text for the people to whom it was first given. If you lift the text out of its historical setting, as one my preachers used to say, it becomes like a cow that gets loose on endless pastures where there are no fences. You can go anywhere because you have no boundaries. History serves as a boundary to a great extent. To interpret the Bible well, you must know Old Testament history.

The third of these four features is the organic nature of the revelation. What is progressively unveiled is like a little seed or an acorn, which contains the entire oak tree in its essence. If you plant an acorn, you will get an oak tree, although it may take a while. When we say that God's revelation is organic in this way, we mean that what God revealed to Adam and Eve before the fall and after the fall were like basic acorns of truth. And by the time Moses had been on earth and had done his work, one could say that the entire revelation of God had been given in germinal form. Some of it had already been quite developed. But the fact remains, the truth was there. Adam and Eve knew enough to be saved because it was given in seed form to them. From a certain point of view, we could say that Adam and Eve could not be held as responsible as we are today, since we have the completed revelation in Jesus Christ as it is recorded in the New Testament for us, but the promise was there in Genesis 3:15 in kernel form. So God's revelation was organic, embodied in history and always unfolding.

One of the problems, therefore, that we have in reading the Bible is where to start. I can recall meeting a young lady in Australia. A young man in our church introduced her to me. He was born in Indonesia and he heard about our church. He was lonely and he wanted fellowship, so he came to our church and became active in the youth work, but he was still lonely. Then one day he said to me, "I found a lady of my liking, but she has never read the Bible. What should I do?" I said, "Bring her to me. I'll see what I can do about that." And I met Claudia. She was 23 years old and the only time she had ever read the Bible was for an English assignment in high school where she had been told to read Luke 2:1-25, and in her own words "write what happened." That was the only time she had ever had a Bible in her hand. I don't doubt that there are people like that in the United States also. But she was eager to learn. Where should I tell her to start reading? Should I tell her to start with creation? She had heard all about evolution and she didn't care to get into that problem right away. Should I tell her to start with the Gospel of John? Or with Jesus' birth? I asked her friend, Philip, "Where should I have Claudia begin reading?" He said, "Don't start her at the deep end; somebody tried to start me there and I almost

drowned.” I said, “What’s the deep end?” He said it was the Book of Romans and Isaiah and Leviticus. I set up a little reading schedule for her, starting with Genesis chapter one through Abram’s life in chapter 26, and later reading in the Gospels and the Psalms. I had her look at seven important “births”—the birth of the universe, its rebirth with Noah, the birth of God’s people with Abraham, the birth of the people of Israel in Exodus, and the birth of Christ and then I backed up to the birth of the Davidic covenant and then I went on to the birth of the church. There are different ways of trying to pick up the basic kernels. But this method focuses on the organic nature of God’s revelation.

Finally, Vos’ fourth major feature is adaptability. Everything God ever said was adaptable, that is, applicable to the situation in which He came and which He addressed. When He spoke to Adam and Eve after the sin in the garden, that was very applicable, very adaptable to them. When He spoke to Noah before the flood and after the flood, it was very adaptable to Noah, his sons, their wives and children. God doesn’t talk nonsense. As you follow this study through the Scriptures, you will find that at all times God had a meaningful message, a helpful message, a message that really meant a great deal for the people then. And if we know what the intent of Scripture was when it was first given, that will help us to understand the significance and the meaning it has for us today. The historical situation has changed. History is ongoing.

Now I want to point out that all these approaches we’ve looked at—Philip Watson, Frank Anderson, William Dyrness, George Ladd, Gerhardus Vos—each of these has helpful elements, but I certainly prefer Dr. Vos’ approach to the study of biblical theology. It has helped me immensely to keep my mind in the historical situation, to keep the ongoing, unfolding aspect before me, to remember that revelation is organic and that in order to understand Genesis 3:15, I have to read Matthew 1 and Luke 2 as well as Paul’s exposition of what Christ’s birth and death mean.

Now we move on to outlining biblical theology and we will move rather quickly here. As I mentioned already, there is the thematic approach. This approach takes individual themes and then follows each theme from Genesis through Revelation. Some people like to do biblical theology thematically. What does the Bible say about God following that progression? What does it say about man? What does it say about sin? What does it say about all the other major themes? This approach will give you a good understanding of the various doctrines, but in a way, it’s more like systematic theology than what we call following the process of revelation where God is interacting with man, giving promises concerning the Messiah to come, and always working out His covenant relationship with His people. To see all these themes together is quite complicated. I don’t think any botanist would ever try to understand a tree by following one strand of the tree first and then another strand and then another strand. No, they look at the tree as it develops in its entirety. However, the thematic way of outlining biblical theology can have some advantages. As I pointed out before, Mr. Dyrness has followed that approach and evidently he thought that was the best approach in the mission context where he was teaching in the Mideast.

The liberal historical-critical method can become very, very confusing. Have you heard about the JEDP theories, sources, etc.? A classic example of that is Gerhard von Rad’s two-volume *Old Testament Theology*. He first rearranges the entire Bible according to the way he believes it should have been written. This reminds me of a very noted Jewish scholar, Cyrus Gordon, under whom I had the privilege to study. Gordon said, “Who do these German, American and English scholars think they are to tell my forbearers, the Jewish people, how they should have written? I’ve never heard of such pompous pride.” Have you ever thought of that? What right do German, American, and English critics have to say how the Bible should have been organized and to say that the way the Bible is organized now is basically deceptive? Cyrus Gordon, a very devout Jew, was extremely upset with the liberal critics who have completely reorganized the Bible according to sources and traditions, saying for example that everything

written by P (including Genesis 1 through 11 and the Book of Leviticus) was written about 400 BC, after the time of Ezra. That, to Gordon, was the absolute height of folly and pride.

If you in any way follow some of the more liberal scholarship, you can become terribly confused. They do not follow the historic approach. They do not believe that the Bible was actually written as we read it today, but that it was rewritten and re-edited so many times that it is terribly difficult to determine the source or describe the process of belief. Each scholar who follows this method arranges the biblical material according to his own presuppositions.

I want to point out that I have learned, and I trust you can too, from the biblical theology of some of these liberal scholars. If you stay outside of their system and simply read what they say about a certain passage, sometimes these people have some very helpful things to say. For example, Eichrodt has been very helpful to me in understanding what the Bible says about the nature of the human person—relating soul, spirit, flesh, body, bowels, kidneys, etc.

Another approach is the New Testament quotation approach. Some scholars have said the only way to understand the Old Testament is to see how the New Testament deals with it, so they pick up the main New Testament quotations from the Old Testament. And from the context of the New Testament, they try to determine how the Old Testament was written and how it ought to be understood. But by studying the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament, they do not really permit the Old Testament Scriptures to speak for themselves.

Gerhard Hasel can give you far more information, in his book *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*. He describes these different methods. I recommend this little book to you if you haven't read it before. This man, Hasel, is an evangelical Seventh Day Adventist scholar teaching at St. Andrew's University, which is a Seventh Day Adventist university in Michigan. He believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, but he sets forth his theology of belief in the Seventh Day Adventist setting. His Seventh Day Adventist theology does not come through in this book. One thing I am a bit sorry about is that Gerhard Hasel does give too much credence to some of the historical-critical literary scholars. He doesn't believe that the Bible has one main central theme.

Hasel talks about the descriptive, the confessional, the cross-sectional, and the diachronic approaches to the study. Now these are all rather heavy terms and I do not want to go into detail on these; you can read about them in his book. I will mention a few things briefly. By the descriptive approach, Hasel means the idea that one can be totally objective and simply describe what the people believed and thought. However, objectivity in that sense is impossible, because we all come to the Scriptures with our own colored lenses and our own mindsets. There is no way around that. Don't even attempt this objective, descriptive approach, because it is impossible.

The confessional approach basically asks, "With what will the Bible help me to confess?" What did the people confess in the past? Hasel explains this confessional approach, saying that if the Bible is a book of confessions, it could help us make our confession today. Now there is some truth in that, but the Bible is more than just a confession from the past. We do learn from the Bible how the people responded to much of God's revelation—but often their response was rebellion, not confession! And so the Bible cannot be approached from that confessional point of view because so much of the Bible is not confessional. Gerhard Hasel also explains the cross-section and the diachronic ways of approaching the Bible, but I will not talk about those at present.

Then there is the dispensational approach. We will deal with this in greater detail later. O. Palmer Robertson, in *The Christ of the Covenants*, asks the question, “What structures the Scriptures?” In that study, he gives you a good idea of the dispensational approaches to the Scripture. I say approaches, because there is no single dispensational approach. There is the old school, the new school, and the mediating school among the dispensationalists. They are as divided as the covenantal theologians or any other group of theologians you could think of. But what basically structures Scripture? Robertson opts for the covenantal approach, for which I am thankful.

Now Vos, I believe again, has given us a good approach. On page 16 in his book, he explains how God made a series of covenants. Is that the right way to say it? Or did God come and renew and confirm and expand his covenant relationship with His people? As you go through the Bible, you will find that God first spoke to Adam the *proto-evangelion* (Genesis 3:15), then He came to Noah and told him, “My covenant is with you and it will continue with you.” Then He came to Abram and then to Moses, Joshua and the judges. Then we come to the time of David and the pre-exilic prophets. In 2 Samuel 7, God came and spoke to David and covenanted with him. Then we meet the post-exilic prophets—we have a burst of revelation and then for 400 years there was none. But with Christ’s birth, what an outburst of revelation! The new covenant is established in Christ’s ministry. Then Pentecost comes and the New Testament church unfolds. There will be another great burst of revelation when the Lord Jesus comes for a second time. So we see that there have been a number of periods in history when there were great expansions of revelation.

Moving on to problem areas, what is history? Especially, what kind of history do we have in the Bible? Some people say it is only the history of Israel as a nation. Is that true? Does the Bible only give us a record of what happened to the ethnic people called Israel? Or is the Bible basically a record of believing people? For example, Adam and Eve indicated believing responses when Eve said “I have a man from the Lord” and when Adam named his wife Eve, mother of the living. Is the Bible a record of believing or is the Bible basically only a record of religious ideas separated from whoever may have believed them? So is the Bible a history of Israel as a nation, a history of the believing people, or a history of religious beliefs? Or is it a history of revelation? This is getting closer. The Bible gives us a history of the process of God’s revealing Himself. But the Bible also gives us a history of appropriation, a history of how people either believed or did not believe.

Now I ask you to turn, if you are able, to the chart called “Sketching God’s Revelation.” What we have here is the history of appropriation. At the top, we have God’s revelation, which is verbal before the fall and then there is verbal revelation which is written in history. God continues to perform great acts as He speaks to His people. There is a break between the Old and the New Testament, but all the time that God was acting and speaking, people were responding. They were either appropriating His revelation in faith and obedience or they were rejecting it. The Bible also includes quite a record of how people responded and whether they appropriated or not. This appropriation never stops because the revelation of God is still right here with us in the Scriptures. In the Bible there is a partial record of appropriation; there is a history of redemption, the history of how people were saved or lost. There is also the history of the development of the written record. How was the Bible written?

So you can look at the Bible from six or seven points of historical approaches. We have to pay attention to how the Bible was written, the course of time, how the people responded. In our place now, we want to emphasize that the Bible gives us the history of God revealing Himself in history, in time, with His people. The Bible tells us what God said, how He revealed Himself, why He did it and how it unfolded.

The relation of the Old Testament to the New Testament continues to be another challenging question. Ladd in his introduction showed that you can't separate the Old Testament from the New Testament because Jesus was completely immersed in the Old Testament, as was John the Baptist. Ridderbos in his book, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, strongly emphasized that if you're going to understand the New Testament, you have to understand that New Testament people really knew their Old Testament. Because of that, the relationship between the two and the unity of the two cannot in any way be denied. We will talk much more about that.

Finally, the second to the last point on the outline is the question of the *mitte*. Is there a central unifying theme to the Bible? The word "*mitte*" is the German word for middle, central, and I'm going to show in the next lecture that there are three basic themes that form the core of the Bible—the kingdom, the covenant, and the mediator. These three are inseparable from one another.

Finally, we need to talk about the practicality of biblical theology. In his book, Vos says that one of the things that really helps us is this: biblical theology will help you understand that you can never separate what God said from what God did. I'll repeat: you can never separate what God said from what God did. When God said something, He did it, but He seldom did something without first talking about it. We will see more about that as we move on.