

Biblical Theology, II

I want to read a few verses from Scripture as we begin today. In Psalm 93 we read, “The LORD reigns; He is robed in majesty, the LORD is robed, He is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved.” Psalm 96 has the same reference: “The LORD reigns.” I will be referring to some of these passages in the course of the lecture, as well as to 1 Timothy 2:3-6, “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all men.” In this lecture we will be dealing with some of the central concepts of Scripture, including these two concepts of “king” and “mediator” are definitely two central concepts. Let us pray.

Lord, our God, as we consider what You have revealed to us and as we try to get to the very heart of Your revelation to us, open our eyes. Give us understanding hearts and accepting minds. Thank You for this opportunity to be together. God, we need You. Uphold us, strengthen us, and prepare us for great avenues of service in the future. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I referred briefly to two concepts at the close of the last lecture: the *mitte* and the practicality of biblical theology. I want to pick up on those now and explicate them. Remember that the term *mitte* means “a central concept, a unifying concept, an idea that weaves all together.” A host of suggestions have been made as to what is the central unifying concept that runs through Scripture. Mr. Hasel gives further explanation of this in his book (chapter four, pages 77 to 103), but let’s look now at various attempts to find a central concept.

Sellin, a German scholar, said the central theme of Scripture is the idea of holiness. When you look at the Pentateuch, you notice how often that concept of holiness and sanctity comes through. Then near the end of the Scriptures in the New Testament, in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 we read, “this is the will of God, even your sanctification.” He makes quite a case. There is no doubt that holiness, as a virtue of God and God’s expectation of us as His redeemed people, is indeed an important concept. God wants a holy people because He is holy. “Be holy for I am holy.” It is certainly an important concept, but is it the unifying, integrating concept that puts the whole of Scripture together?

Kohler suggests that the central theme is the word “LORD,” the Hebrew word *Yahweh*—the LORD, the covenant God. He is the theme, not *Elohim*, but God the Almighty whose name is *Yahweh*.

Wildberger talks about the theme of election. God elects Abel and Seth over against Cain; He chooses Shem over against the other brothers, Abram out of the many, then Judah, and so on. The principal of election runs right through all of the Scriptures. I’m not going to argue with Mr. Wildberger. The theme of election is certainly there. But is it the unifying concept? Rather, I would call it an important sub-theme.

Three other scholars—Klein, a German; Bright, an American Presbyterian; and Helberg, a leading scholar in South Africa—all say the idea of kingdom is the central concept. Bright has a whole book on it, *The Kingdom of God*. Halberg wrote a four-volume syllabus explicating the idea of kingdom from a more evangelical Reformed point of view than Bright did.

Fohrer says the themes are rule and communion—what ties Scripture together is that God rules and we have to be a communion. Vriezen, a scholar in the Netherlands who is inclined towards neo-orthodoxy, claims that the central theme is God and His people, God and community. Smend, another German scholar, believes that it is *Yahweh* and Israel. For him the Bible is all about how the covenant Lord

covenanted with Israel. Von Rad in his two-volume book and in his commentaries says that there is no unifying theme. The Bible is a whole series of confessions; depending on the time and the circumstances in which people lived, they emphasized different things. There is really no unity in God's revelation.

Eichrodt says the theme is "covenant." He believes that the idea of covenant first became prevalent as the unifying concept in Israel's thinking at Sinai when the people had escaped from Egypt and said "God must really like us. Look what He's done for us. He has related Himself to us in a unique and powerful way." From that point on, Israel thought of themselves as a people in covenant, in special relationship with God.

Now Hasel, to whom I referred before says, "None of these above. They are all limited as to their reference. I want to emphasize that God is the central concept in the Scriptures." You will find that in his summary on page 139. He says, "If we settle for a central concept, it's God. God is the heart of the Bible." The theme of God encompasses creation, it encompasses election, it encompasses holiness. It encompasses everything. So you see there are many different suggestions and the discussion goes on and on.

I want to propose that there is a complex of three themes, but I want to say right from the beginning that I understand very well that the sovereign God, who is the Revealer and Lord of all, is indeed to be kept in the foreground. God, the Sovereign One. God, the Holy One. God, the Electing One. The Bible is the Book of God. The Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, is a book about the triune God. I'm not going to argue with Hasel about that, but I do want to point out that there are three other themes that go right through Scripture from beginning to end and these are the kingdom, the covenant, and the mediator. The kingdom is the all-embracing framework, the covenant is the instrument by which God rules His kingdom and saves His people and guides them, and the mediator is the agent of all this. Concerning the kingdom of God, remember I just read to you, "God reigns." We will talk further about that. I also read to you that there is one mediator who stands between God and man. There are many more passages that speak about these themes.

I do not think it is very helpful to try to limit the biblical message to one word. Hasel would say, "God." But we may think of God with the three major themes: His kingdom, His covenant, His mediator. We can also think of human beings within these three themes: we are part of His kingdom; we are His covenant people; we are called to participate in the work of mediation. So these three concepts do not exclude the community at all.

I want to refer now to the benefits, or the practicality, of seeing the central theme of Scripture. God—the sovereign, holy, electing One—has in creation set up His kingdom and has set up an administrative means within it, appointing His agent, the mediator. If you keep that in mind as you go through Scripture, you will understand more readily and easily what God was saying and what God was doing. I mentioned in the previous lecture that word and deed can never be separated. What God said He would do, He did. As He spoke, it happened. The power of His word is unlimited. At times, the results of that spoken word were incomprehensible to the people who received it, but then later God would explain that word and that deed.

As you preach and as you teach, it is helpful to keep these central concepts in mind and ask yourself, "How does my passage particularly relate to these three themes?" The same applies when you want to speak of getting a comprehensive grasp of the unity of the entire Bible. Von Rad says there is no unity, but he is incorrect: the Bible is a rich, unified message. If you see God, the Sovereign, with His

kingdom, His covenant, and His mediator, you will see that the Bible has given us a unified message all the way through the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Looking at these central unifying themes, we see the relationship between word and deed. We also see how we can grasp the unity of the Bible, but this task also calls for a use of every biblical discipline that you can imagine. I know that some students are not always happy about studying Hebrew and Greek; these introductory language courses can become fairly tedious and monotonous. We professors have a difficult time making it interesting to study the literature and the formal aspect of the Bible. Then there is the tedious work of exegeting the Proverbs and exegeting the prophets and having to work with our Hebrew and Greek and having to work with the history of the text. But all these disciplines are necessary if we want to grasp the unity of the Bible and see how word and deed are related.

To do biblical theology properly, to see these central themes and follow them through will necessarily drive you back to your introduction, back to your Hebrew and Greek, back to your history. That is when you start to realize that your seminary training makes sense after all. I think biblical theology more than any other course will do that for you. And, finally, as I have already mentioned, to find these central, unifying, leading concepts through the Scripture will be a tremendously helpful instrument as you teach and preach.

I want to tell you about a visit I made back home. I grew up in California and when I was in the third grade, my father moved our family so that he could put us in a Christian school. Whenever I go back to that school, they ask me to teach the Bible in the Bible classes. This time I taught a lesson on Deuteronomy, and I showed how Deuteronomy was a repetition of what God had done with Adam and Noah and so forth. There was a man present who had been teaching there for 20 years. He listened and took notes and the next time I came to visit there he said, “George, I always struggled with trying to get my lessons ready for the students in my Bible classes here in the 7th and 8th and 9th grade. Those two hours you spent with me, showing the unity of Scripture—the kingdom, the covenant, the mediator—opened up everything for me. Now I am excited about teaching Bible, where before it was a problem.” This is why I am telling you to get the unity of Scripture clearly in mind. See its major central themes. See how these follow through. We will try to do that in this course.

Let us turn now to look at the kingdom. The term “kingdom” refers to one or more of these four aspects in a given text: the king, the reign, the throne, and the domain. Often the term refers to the king and that is a metonymy. Instead of referring to the whole kingdom, the king is singled out. You cannot have a kingdom without the king. Mention “king” and you think of the kingdom, correct? However, there are other times that the emphasis, especially when the verb is there, is on the reign of the king. Mr. Ladd and Mr. Ridderbos (in his book *The Coming of the Kingdom*) emphasize that Jesus said that the very heart of the kingdom idea is the reign of God from the time of creation until the great consummation and into eternity. God is active in His reigning. God’s reign is His controlling and directing all events and aspects of life. Then again, there are times that the reference is to the throne, the center of activity. Sometimes, there is a reference to Jerusalem, for example. Jerusalem is singled out because it was the location of the throne. The throne was the heart of the kingdom. From there, the reign went forth from him who sat on the throne. So, at times, Jerusalem is used to refer to the kingdom, the throne. Finally, is it possible to think of the kingdom without thinking of the domain, that which is reigned over? I can remember the time when King Faruk was dethroned in Egypt and he fled to Italy. They still called him King Faruk, but he had no throne. He did not exercise any reign and there was no domain. The title “king” was just the reminder of what he had been. No, to be a king, if you have a throne, you will reign, and there has to be something you are reigning over. The Bible speaks a great deal about the reign over the domain.

There is a great deal of argument about how extensive this domain is. When did God start reigning over a domain? Was Israel His first domain? No, as I read already from the Psalms, the LORD reigns. He reigns over the nations. He reigns over the earth. He reigns. Everything is His domain. From the time of creation until now, you and I and every one of us are part of God's domain. Not all people respond to His reign in the same way. We understand what it is to have revolutions and to have groups of people who resist authority, but the fact that there are some people who will not acknowledge the reign does not mean that they are not part of the domain. The fact that some people do not acknowledge God or His mediator does not mean that they are not under the reign of God or that they are not part of His domain.

Now I would like to refer to a few biblical terms. First of all, the verb *malak* (the Hebrew spelling is *mem-lamed-kaph*). For you who don't know Hebrew, m-a-l-a-k is the Hebrew verb that's translated "to reign" and the Hebrew term *melek* is the word for "king" and the word *mamelakah* is the basic term for "kingdom," although it doesn't appear very often.

Now if you pick up your concordance, and I would suggest that you pick up a Hebrew concordance first, you will find that there are pages and pages listing this verb and its noun and its derivatives. The Bible is simply full of the idea of the king, the idea of one reigning. Often the reference is to a small kingdom or to King David or King Solomon, but the word also repeatedly refers to God reigning. Because God reigns, Nebuchadnezzar can reign and Cyrus can reign. Because God reigns, David could reign, and because God reigns, the people of Israel went into exile under Nebuchadnezzar and came back under King Cyrus.

This idea of authority, exercised through reign—whether it is in human kingdoms, in large kingdoms or small ones—is a central idea in the Bible. In that respect, Klein, Bright, and Helberg are surely correct to say the idea of kingdom—the king, the reign, the throne, the domain—runs through all Scripture. If we have a good concept of how God reigns, then we will begin to understand also how the Bible can speak of the nations in their kingdoms and why their kings could reign. This all happens under the reign of God. The kingdom is a major concept.

In the New Testament, we have many references to the *basileia*. I expect you all know that Greek word very well. The thing that truly intrigues me is that when I pick up New Testament biblical theologies like Mr. Ladd's and I look at his first section, I find his introduction is about John the Baptist and the need of the kingdom. That is how the New Testament begins: John came preaching the kingdom. In the first 120 or 130 pages of the book by Mr. Ridderbos, the New Testament scholar in the Netherlands, we find: the kingdom of God, the God of the kingdom, the mystery of the kingdom, the kingdom of the church, the ethics of the kingdom. Ridderbos emphasizes in this book that the kingdom has come. The title is *The Coming of the Kingdom*, but his second chapter is "The Kingdom Has Come," because the mediator is present. That is how both John the Baptist and Jesus started their preaching.

In Matthew 3:2, John preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Then when he says, "Behold the Lamb of God," John was referring to the king who came to reign and in his reign could serve as the redeeming mediator. Jesus started His preaching, according to Matthew 4:17, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The King is here. His reign is increasingly being expressed in the world. He is reigning. "Devil, get out!" And what did the devils do? They got out because Jesus is King. And He would say to a sick person, "Rise up and walk." How could the sick person do that? Because Jesus, the King, healed and gave power for that person to rise up and walk. Jesus, the King was exercising His reign within His domain. He had come from heaven, but His throne is wherever He is. Wherever He comes, He exerts His power and His reign. Blessed be everyone whose heart is the throne of the Lord Jesus. That only happens when we are born again, when we are converted.

I have certainly seen how God used my own father in the process of making my heart His throne. I have seen it also as God used me and my dear wife to help our children come to know the Mediator and Redeemer and to surrender their hearts to become His throne. Many of you are parents, and I am sure many of you hope to be parents, if you do not yet have children. We can do a lot as mediators in the family so that Jesus' reign becomes powerful in our families and in the hearts of our children. Only the Holy Spirit can change a heart, but the Holy Spirit certainly uses parents and teachers and I hope professors too.

The Book of Acts concludes with Paul preaching the kingdom. Luke summed up Paul's preaching in this way. In Acts 28:28, he says, "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles and they will listen!" God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, not only to the Jews. Many of them didn't listen. But the Gentiles will listen. Verses 30 and 31: "For two whole years, Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance, he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ," the Mediator, the Redeemer.

I want to remind you that this idea of kingdom can never be separated from the concept of covenant. The term *berith*, the Hebrew word for "covenant," is used 290 times in the Bible. I was amazed a couple of days ago when a young man who is doing some specialized study here with me, said to me that until he came and started studying here at Covenant Seminary, he had not really ever heard of the term "covenant." When he heard that it was mentioned 290 times in the Bible, he raced home and picked up his concordance, and there it was. He said, "How had I missed it all my life? Here I am more than 30 years old and I never knew that God was a covenanting God." Now the term "covenant" is never defined in the Bible. You will note that in Vos' book, on pages 23-24 and 256-257, he struggles to define the term. It is not easy to define by any means.

Now people have tried to find the meaning of the term by looking at its etymology. Etymology is the root term from which a word comes. I want to draw your attention to three verbs. The verb *bara* means "to create." Most of the time the verb *bara* means to create, but it also carries a meaning of "to cut," and so some have tried to find a connection with God creating a relationship by cutting some kind of a contract. However, looking at this verb is not very helpful in understanding the meaning of "covenant." Forget *bara*—unless you are talking about God creating the world. It does not have much to do with the covenant.

Others have suggested that *berith* comes from the Hebrew verb *barah*, which is the common word for "to eat." You will find that at times in the Scriptures when people covenanted they would sit down and eat together. A contract or a treaty would be consummated at the table. The table is a good place to sit down and talk. We make our agreements there. We understand each other. So some people think that the idea of covenant comes from eating together, but the problem is that *barah* ends with the Hebrew letter *he* and *berith* ends with the letter *taw*. Now we know that the *taw* indicates a plural form, but we don't translate that "covenants." So *barah* has a *he* and not a *taw* and that has driven to the fact that there's a verb that's used so often. It's the verb, *karath*, "to cut a covenant." In our general reading most of us have come to the conclusion, at least because that was the impression that we received, that a covenant was always cut. When a covenant was made, some cutting was done.

Now in Genesis 15, you have the Semitic ceremony where animals were cut in half. By the way, the birds aren't cut in half. They just had their throats cut and one was laid on each side, but the young bullock was cut in half and then the two contracting parties were supposed to go through the middle and

from that somehow or another, they think that a covenant is basically a cut deal. However, the problem with this idea is that it does not have strong etymological support.

Let's look at the verb *kum*—"rise, establish." Did you know that this verb is used first of all in the Bible to refer to covenant making? Dumbrell points out that when it is used in the hiphil positive form, the term basically means "to continue." The idea is that of continuing with someone or maintaining something. There is no doubt that the verb *karath* is often used when there is some covenanting activity, like in Genesis 15. In Genesis 17, however, we find two other verbs. Genesis 17 is often considered the classic passage of God's covenanting with Abraham. There you find the verb, *nathan*, "to give." The idea of a gift comes through there. "I give you my covenant, Abraham." Then the next verb that is used there is, "My covenant *haya* (is, it exists)." Once I give it, it is with you. Then He goes on to say that there will be a sign of the covenant: you shall circumcise. That is when the idea of *karath* is used, because *karath* is typically used when there is a shedding of blood or when a new element is added.

But then another verb is used—*zakar*, "to remember," like in the last few verses of Exodus 2, when God remembers what He has established and what He is maintaining. Another verb that comes through is *shamar*, God keeps. Incidentally, *shamar* is the verb that is used by far the most when people are told to be obedient, to guard, to uphold, to keep, and to obey the covenant that God has made. One more verb, and this is the one that we find very interestingly with the case of David, is *sum*. *Sum* means "to set." We see the verb *sum* in the first few verses of 2 Samuel 23, "God has set something with me." That same verb is used in talking about the foundations being laid for buildings, just like *kum*. If something is firmly established, the verbs *kum* and *sum* are both used.

Now when you look at all these different verbs, you begin to realize, I trust, that covenant-making and covenant-keeping were very rich, involved activities. God, the King, pays attention to the various historic situations and the context in which He comes to His people and covenants with them. He uses different terms to emphasize different nuances. Again, I want to emphasize that you must not minimize your study of Hebrew and Greek in looking at these basic concepts.

The term that I believe is basically at the root and the heart of the whole idea of covenant comes from the general Semitic world. It is expressed most clearly in the Assyrian language. *Birtu* is the term which means "a bond, a relationship." God established a relationship, a relationship which is so firmly grounded in the very being and word and character of God that it is unbreakable. It is a bond, unbreakable in the way a marriage ought to be. A marriage is a covenant established by God that should reflect the unbreakable relationship of God with us.

In the human world, covenants are broken: business covenants, social contracts, political agreements. From God's point of view, however, covenant is never broken once the bond is established. It may result in curses on the disobedient, but for those who respond in faith, it is life everlasting because God doesn't break relationships. He keeps us bound to Himself. This covenant can be translated in different ways: "league," "compact," etc. We can think of different aspects of the covenant also. We can talk about the covenant as "unilateral." All of God's covenants are unilateral. God is the only one who functions. However, there are some covenants in the Bible that are "bilateral," with two equal parties. In marriage, we have a bilateral covenant. When Hiram and Solomon make a covenant, it is bilateral.

There are two other terms that are very important. We will deal with them in the course of these lectures, and they are the terms "conditional" and "contingent." Is the covenant conditional? "If you do this, then this will happen." Or is it contingent? "When you do this, this takes place." There is quite a difference between conditionality and contingency. If one insists on the legal conditional aspect, then one can in a

way say that people can make a deal with God. In Genesis 29 when Jacob says *em Yahweh*, if God indeed blesses me, I will give him a tenth. Is he saying “if God does it, then I will,” (making a deal with God) or does he say “when God blesses me, I will give him a tenth”? There is a big difference between conditionality and contingency. God asks us to respond to Him with obedience. When we obey, we receive blessing; when we disobey, we receive cursing.

We will talk about the elements of the covenant (parties, obligations, promises) at quite some length. Read Kline’s book. I suggest that you read Mendenhall and Kline on this. We will be talking about the different elements of the covenant all along, and I mention them now so you will know how they tie in with it. But as in all cases, Reformed scholars don’t always agree as to how best to define the term “covenant” and how to understand it. I want to draw your attention to an article by Dr. O. Palmer Robertson in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, Volume 40, #1, the Fall 1977 issue. In this article Robertson compares the view of the covenant of John Murray, the great theologian of Westminster, with that of Meredith Kline, the great Old Testament theologian, and offers his own view. You will find that there are a number of differences and if he would have paid attention to what I have been saying in writing, he would have had a fourth view to talk about. I believe that a covenant is an abiding relationship that God sets up. You will be hearing more about that.

At the very heart of it all is the third concept, the mediator. We will begin with that in the next lecture because Adam and Eve were the first mediators of the covenant within the kingdom. The next mediator was the seed of the woman, and then kings and priests and prophets, and then the second Adam, who was the full and perfect Mediator of the covenant, the Christ.