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The Promise of Biblical Theology: What Biblical Theology Is and What It Isn't

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It's a privilege to be delivering this year's Sizemore lectures on the topic "The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology." Today, in my first lecture, I will explore "The Promise of Biblical Theology: What Biblical Theology Is, and What It Isn't." Then, I will follow this up with a lecture on "The Practice of Biblical Theology: How Biblical Theology Is Done: Studying a Book, Corpus, or Major Theme in Scripture." Specifically, I'll engage in a couple case studies on the letters to Timothy and Titus (commonly known as the Pastoral Epistles) and on the person of the Holy Spirit.

What Is Biblical Theology?

One might simply say, "Biblical Theology is theology that is biblical"—theology that is biblically grounded. The problem with this definition, however, is that all Christian theology should be properly grounded in Scripture, so positing this kind of definition seems to be merely stating the obvious.

So, how about the following: "Biblical Theology is the theology of the Bible." In other words, Biblical Theology is not our own theology, or that of our church or denomination, it is the theology of the biblical writers themselves. Old Testament theology, then, is the theology of the Old Testament writers, and New Testament theology the theology of the New Testament writers; Pauline theology is the theology of Paul, Johannine theology the theology of John, and so forth. If this is the way we define

Biblical Theology, this doesn't merely mean that you and I are constructing our theology based on the Bible (though we should of course do that). Rather, the focus is on the writers of Scripture and on their beliefs and convictions as they expressed them in the Old Testament and New Testament writings.

The academic discipline of Biblical Theology is commonly said to have begun with the German scholar Johann Philipp Gabler and his 1787 inaugural address at the University of Altdorf entitled "*On the Correct Distinction Between Dogmatic and Biblical Theology and the Right Definition of Their Goals.*" More recently, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Biblical Theology movement sought to popularize the discipline by blending historical criticism with confessional theology, but unfortunately did so by unduly dichotomizing between God's redemptive acts in history and the biblical text. The enterprise stalled to the extent that Brevard Childs could write a book in 1970 with the title *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Also, James Barr severely criticized practitioners of the Biblical Theology movement for inadequate methodological and linguistic procedures, so much so that some thought he had killed the whole enterprise of Biblical Theology. Since then, however, especially within the North American conservative evangelical world, a new kind of Biblical Theology has flourished which is based on a high view of Scripture and yet is based on solid historical research and keen literary study. It is this kind of Biblical Theology that I am going to espouse in these lectures.

In Gabler's vein, the Swiss-German theologian Adolf Schlatter put the matter well a century ago when he wrote, "In speaking of 'New Testament' theology, we are saying that it is not the interpreter's own theology or that of his church and times that is examined but rather the theology expressed by the New Testament itself." In view of this, how should we go about discerning the theology of the Bible? Again, Schlatter's comments are helpful: "We turn away decisively from ourselves and our time to what was found in the men through whom the church came into being. Our main interest should be the thought as it was conceived *by them* and the truth that was valid *for them*. We want to see and obtain a thorough grasp of what happened historically and existed in another time." Schlatter calls this "the historical task," which is followed by "the doctrinal task" of systematizing the Bible's teachings on a given subject.

Some have conceived of the relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology in terms of parent and child, with Biblical Theology being the parent and Systematic Theology being the child. I like to think of the relationship more as a genuine partnership between 2 related, adjacent disciplines. The image of a relay race comes to mind where one runner, Biblical Theology, hands off the baton to the next runner, Systematic Theology. The 2 disciplines run the race together, and win or lose together, but Biblical Theology is the first runner and Systematic Theology the second one. Or, actually, since Biblical Theology is properly based on introductory matters such as authorship, date, provenance, audience, occasion, and purpose for writing, as well as on the exegesis of specific texts, if you have a 4-person relay team, introductory matters would run first, followed by exegesis, then Biblical Theology, and last Systematic Theology! Hopefully introductory matters would get you off to a great start, exegesis would build a solid lead, Biblical Theology would even extend the lead, and Systematic Theology would get you home across the finish line! I don't know about you, but I'd love to be part of that kind of theological relay team!

So, then, when it comes to the handoff, do Biblical Theology first and Systematic Theology second. Incidentally, this is exactly what Schlatter himself did: He first wrote a 2-volume New Testament theology (*The History of the Christ* and *The Theology of the Apostles*) and subsequently a Systematic Theology (*Das christliche Dogma*), not to mention books on ethics, philosophy, and a vast variety of other subjects. Not only is it important to distinguish between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology and to do Biblical Theology first, but as Schlatter reminds us, it is also important not to unduly blur the line between these two disciplines. Otherwise, our view of the Bible's teaching may become distorted and our application imprecise if not invalid. Schlatter writes, "The distinction between these two activities [Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology] thus turns out to be beneficial for both. Distortions in the perception of the subject also harm its appropriation, just as conversely improper procedures in the appropriation of the subject muddy it perception." In other words, before moving to application, we need to engage in Biblical Theology, which Schlatter calls "the historical task."

All this discussion of definitional matters may seem rather pedantic, but I believe that it is exceedingly important that before we engage in the

practice of Biblical Theology, we have a clear understanding of what it is we're doing. Definitions matter. Whether you write a dissertation, or a smaller essay or research paper, or even engage in everyday conversation with your wife or husband or a friend, it's vital that the two of you are on the same page, and part of this is defining your key terms carefully and explicitly.

Alright, then, if you're on board with the basic definition I've set forth—that Biblical Theology is the theology of the Bible and the biblical writers themselves—this raises the obvious set of follow-up questions: How do you know what the theology of the biblical writers is? What is your method? Is ascertaining the theology of the biblical writers even a realistic goal? Those are valid questions. Students of the history of biblical interpretation know that scholars have increasingly come to realize that interpretation has an inescapable subjective component, and this is likely to affect our ability to arrive at a definitive understanding of the theology of a given biblical writer.

A few years ago, one of my students, Ed Herrelko, wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the role of presuppositions in Biblical Theology, a rather neglected topic. Specifically, he compared the Pauline theologies of James Dunn and Tom Schreiner. Both scholars profess to engage in Biblical Theology—they share the same essential definition of the nature and goals of Biblical Theology along the lines I just discussed—and yet, when you look at their respective works, they come to very different conclusions as to what the theology of Paul really was.

What this case study demonstrates, I believe, is that we all come to the practice of Biblical Theology with a set of presuppositions that will impact the outcome of our Biblical Theology work. In the case of Dunn's and Schreiner's Pauline theologies, such presuppositions include their *view of Scripture*, their views on *introductory matters*, and their *use of history*. Schreiner is an inerrantist who believes Paul wrote all 13 letters attributed to him in the New Testament. Dunn does not affirm inerrancy and holds to the Pauline authorship of only 7 of the 13 letters. Obviously, if you write a Pauline theology just based on Romans, Galatians, 1-2 Corinthians, and a few other letters, your Pauline theology will look different than if you base it on all 13 letters. Also, as mentioned, Dunn and Schreiner differ as to the use of first-century Jewish *background* in interpreting Paul's letters. Dunn is one of the major proponents of the "NPP," while Schreiner holds to a Reformed perspective. (We don't have

the opportunity to go into the details of the NPP debate in any great detail here, but in general terms, scholars such as Dunn put a lot more stock in Second Temple literature and proportionately less value on Scripture itself. If you're interested in this subject, you may want to check out the recent critique of Tom Wright by Tom Holland, capably reviewed by my student Mark Baker for Books at a Glance. You may also want to consult Tom Wright's history of Pauline scholarship, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, though, of course, Wright is not exactly unbiased, as he is one of the major proponents of the New Perspective.)

But back to our main topic: How do we properly engage in Biblical Theology? It's true that anyone aiming to discover the theology of a given writer of Scripture faces the inescapable reality of his own presuppositions. Now I hasten to add that presuppositions—or preunderstanding, as some call it—aren't necessarily a problem. If they are well grounded, which I believe a high view of Scripture and a belief in the Pauline authorship of his 13 New Testament letters certainly are, presuppositions can serve as an invaluable foundation for our Biblical Theology work. What is more, even if none of us is perfect as an interpreter, I would still argue that discovering the theology of the Bible, however provisionally, remains the proper aim of Biblical Theology. Just because we're able to arrive at a reconstruction of Paul's theology only imperfectly doesn't mean we should stop trying. This is where the scholarly community can do its work, so that through mutual dialogue and critique we can approximate an accurate picture of Paul's theology more closely. In fact, I believe aiming to discover the theology of Paul or any other biblical writer follows inexorably from an evangelical hermeneutic that aims to discover the intent of a given biblical author.

In the next lecture, I will give two examples of what such a project in Biblical Theology may look like, one from studying a corpus of Scripture—Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus—and another from studying a major theme in Scripture (the Holy Spirit). In addition, I've done work on a Biblical Theology of manhood and womanhood in my book *God's Design for Man & Woman*, on a Biblical Theology of mission in my book *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, and on Johannine theology. So, for me, this is not merely a theoretical discussion. Rather, I've tried to put Biblical Theology to work "for the church" in several of my writings because I believe Biblical Theology has great promise for preachers and teachers and serious students of God's word. Biblical

Theology matters and is worthy of your and my utmost attention and careful definition and execution.

Biblical Theology & Systematic Theology

Now that I've developed in some detail what Biblical Theology is, let's spend a moment distinguishing it from what it isn't, namely Systematic Theology. This brief reflection on a comparison and contrast between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology will help us sharpen our definition of Biblical Theology even further. We can define "Systematic Theology" as a methodical, thorough study and presentation of the biblical data on a given subject. D. A. Carson (last year's Sizemore lecturer) defines Systematic Theology as "Christian theology whose internal structure is ... organized on atemporal principles of logic, order, and need." Typically, Systematic Theology moves from prolegomena such as protology, cosmology, and bibliology to theology proper (God), Christology, soteriology, pneumatology, angelology/demonology, anthropology, hamartiology, ecclesiology (including missiology), and eschatology.

Yet while Systematic Theology can be very beneficial, there are also certain dangers associated with it. Carson highlights these in a recent editorial in the online journal *Themelios* (42/1 [January 2017]), entitled, "Subtle Ways to Abandon the Authority of Scripture in Our Lives," where he discusses ways in which biblical authority may be sidestepped, if even unconsciously. The fifth point in his list reads as follows:
"Allowing the Categories of Systematic Theology to Domesticate What Scripture Says.

> Most emphatically, this point is neither belittling systematic theology nor an attempt to sideline the discipline. When I warn against the danger of systematic theology domesticating what Scripture says, I nevertheless gladly insist that, properly deployed, systematic theology enriches, deepens, and safeguards our exegesis. The old affirmation that theology is the queen of the sciences has much to commend it. The best of systematic theology not only attempts to bring together all of Scripture in faithful ways, but also at its best enjoys a pedagogical function that helps to steer exegesis away from irresponsible options that depend on mere linguistic manipulation, by consciously taking

> into account the witness of the entire canon. Such theology-disciplined exegesis is much more likely to learn from the past than exegesis that shucks off everything except the faddish.
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> So, there are ways in which exegesis shapes systematic theology and ways in which systematic theology shapes exegesis. That is not only as it should be; it is inevitable. Yet the *authority* of Scripture in our lives is properly unique. Systematic theology is corrigible; Scripture is not (although our exegesis of Scripture certainly is).
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> Failure to think through the implications of this truth makes it easy for us to allow the categories of systematic theology to domesticate what Scripture says. The categories we inherit or develop in our systematic theology may so constrain our thinking about what the Bible says that the Bible's own voice is scarcely heard. Thus diminished, the authority of the Bible is insufficient to reform our systematic theology. ... It is the part of humility and wisdom not to allow our theological categories to domesticate what Scripture says."

That's Don Carson's caveat, and I would certainly agree. We need to be careful to engage in Biblical Theology *first* before moving on to Systematic Theology. In this way, we can guard against the tendency to read our own questions and issues into the text. Now that I've developed what I mean by "Biblical Theology"—what it is and what it isn't—I'd like to discuss two important aspects of Biblical Theology that will lay the groundwork for our case studies in the next lecture.

Biblical Theology & Hermeneutics

The first has to do with *hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology are closely related. Defined as the theory of biblical interpretation, hermeneutics is the basic approach we take to study any given passage of the Bible. In my book, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, I propose a threefold approach to interpreting Scripture that involves the study of history, literature, and theology. Each of these three elements corresponds to a reality which we face as biblical interpreters.

First, the Bible was given to us in a historical-cultural framework that we need to consider as we interpret the meaning of a given statement in Scripture.

Second, the Bible comes to us as a text, a body of literature, that requires careful linguistic and literary interpretation.

Third, as the inspired, inerrant Word of God, the Bible is divine revelation and disclosure of who God is and what his will is for our lives. For this reason, then, we should study the Bible historically, literarily, and, above all, theologically.

This threefold hermeneutic, in turn, should be grounded in our quest to ascertain the intent of the original author. In keeping with the inductive nature of biblical interpretation, and Biblical Theology as well, we should always ask first, "What did a given biblical writer intend to convey to his original readers when he wrote a certain passage?"

Only after we've answered this question by engaging in solid historical, literary, and theological study are we ready to move on to ask the second, related question, "Now that I know what Paul *meant*, what does that mean for me and my community *today*?" This is what some call the two horizons of biblical interpretation: the first horizon of the original author's intent, and the second horizon of our own contemporary world with our quest for relevance and application or appropriation.

I know that some skeptics object that these two horizons can never be bridged successfully because we no longer have access to the original author's intended meaning. My simple response is that we should usually expect to be able to infer with reasonable confidence what Paul, or John, or another author of Scripture, meant by what he said in a certain text. Of course, there are a few difficult passages where even godly interpreters differ, but by and large Scripture is clear and accessible to interpretation by those who come to the task with a spiritual disposition, a proper method of study, and the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

What Method?

Alright, then, so we've defined Biblical Theology as essentially the theology of the Bible that we need to discern, and we've proposed a triadic hermeneutic aiming to discern the authorial intent by studying the historical, literary, and theological dimensions of Scripture. That said, what method should we use when engaging in Biblical Theology?

My mentor Don Carson once remarked, "Everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes, and calls it Biblical Theology." So, giving proper attention to method is very important. I'd suggest that such a method needs to include the following three essential ingredients. First, such a method should be *historical*. That is, unlike Systematic Theology, which tends to be abstract and topical in nature, Biblical Theology aims to understand a given passage of Scripture in its original historical setting. For example, when interpreting the well-known passage, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jer 29:11), we should ask who the original recipients of this promise were and at what stage of Israel's history this prophecy was uttered. Or when studying the Biblical Theology of tithing, for example, we need to interpret references to tithing in Malachi or Matthew regarding the specific salvation-historical situation at which a given passage in Scripture is found.

Second, Biblical Theology will seek to study Scripture *inductively, on its own terms*, in a way that pays special attention, not merely to the concepts addressed in Scripture but to the very words, vocabulary, and terminology used by the biblical writers themselves. Rather than investigating "sanctification" as a broader topic, for example, the biblical theologian will study the individual words that are used in the Bible to express what may be called the subject of Christian growth, words such as "set apart" (*hagiazō*) or "grow" (*auxanō*). This is the purpose of Biblical Theology: to understand the theology of the Bible on its own terms before systematizing its teachings on various subjects and making application. (By the way, a helpful book on the Biblical Theology of sanctification is David Peterson's, *Possessed by God.*)

Third, Biblical Theology is primarily *descriptive*. That is, our primary goal in Biblical Theology is to listen to Scripture and to accurately describe the convictions and beliefs of the biblical writers themselves. While we should be actively engaged as good listeners of Scripture, we are focused on understanding and adequately representing the convictions of the authors of Scripture. Once we've done so, we are ready to ask questions of contemporary relevance and application.

Only One Way?

Before I wrap things up in this lecture, I'd like to discuss one more important question related to method in Biblical Theology. That is, is

there only *one* right way to do Biblical Theology, or is there a range of options? In a recent article in the online journal *Themelios* published by the Gospel Coalition, I've surveyed a wide variety of publications on Biblical Theology and proposed a simple taxonomy. I've suggested that there are essentially four major ways of engaging in Biblical Theology: (1) a study of major themes in Scripture book by book (what I call the "classical" approach); (2) a study of central themes throughout Scripture; (3) identifying a single center of Scripture; and (4) metanarrative approaches focused on discerning the Bible's major storyline.

Let's take a few moments and look at each of these approaches in turn.

First, people have studied the theology of a given *book* or *corpus* of Scripture. In the next lecture, I will give the specific example of the LTT. Focusing initially on the study of the theology of a given writer of Scripture one book or corpus at a time has the virtue of respecting the integrity of the book as a holistic discourse unit. Even when we study Paul's theology, for example, we'll likely find that he emphasized different attributes of God or aspects of the Christian life in his various writings, in part depending on the needs of the congregation to which he wrote. I think you can see how looking at each of Paul's letters one at a time will be essential and highly beneficial if we want to understand his thought as precisely as possible. Then, of course, we may try to provide a synthesis of Paul's thought more generally, but not until we've studied his message in each of his writings individually first. I call this the "classic approach" (picking up on a comment made by Greg Beale in his *New Testament Biblical Theology*), because this is the way people have traditionally conceived of and practically carried out biblical-theological study, and I certainly think this is how we should continue to conceive of Biblical Theology as far as its essence is concerned.

Second, some, such as Scott Hafemann and Paul House, have used a *central themes* approach. Rather than looking at the theology of individual books of Scripture, such scholars have tried to discern major themes throughout Scripture—such as God, Messiah, salvation, and so forth—and attempted to trace the way in which these themes integrate progressive biblical revelation. This, of course, can be a very valuable enterprise, as it showcases the unity and coherence of Scripture. At the same time, I would still argue that it would be best to start with a study of the theology of individual books of the Bible before moving on to

connecting the dots in form of central themes. In this way, we won't lose sight of the distinctive teaching of each individual book of Scripture.

Third, like the elusive quest for the Holy Grail, some biblical theologians have sought to identify the *center* of Scripture. Somewhat ironically, those who've tried to do so have come up with different results, which makes you wonder whether there is such a single center. It's easy to see that in a Bible made up of 66 books written over more than 2,000 years there will be a certain amount of diversity. Not every book of Scripture focuses on the same thing. Therefore, it would seem best to view Scripture as a unity in diversity where different writers—such as the four evangelists—each emphasize certain things depending on their personal vantage point and purpose for writing to a given audience. For my part, I believe that, rather than speaking of a single center, it may be better to speak of several integrative motifs in Scripture. In fact, I've written an essay for a volume edited by Scott Hafemann where I've argued for three major interrelated New Testament motifs, God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the gospel. Thus, most scholars in the field have rightly abandoned the quest for a single center; the only exception in recent decades is James Hamilton's, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment.*

Let me elaborate on the limitations of a single-center Biblical Theology a little more. Quite clearly, there are multiple themes in Scripture. For example, there is the *creation/new creation* theme. The opening of Genesis is matched by the ending of Revelation. Paul writes that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, and neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters: what matters is a new creation. Also, Christ is the second or last Adam, the image of the invisible God. John says that in the beginning was the Word, but now the Word has come and lived among us, and died for us, and then Jesus breathes on his new messianic community and commissions his followers to fulfill their mission. So you can see that creation and new creation is certainly a vital Biblical Theology motif.

But creation theology is not the only significant, pervasive theme in Scripture. Another such theme is that of *covenant.* People differ as to whether you can speak of an Adamic covenant, but there is clearly a Noahic covenant, and then an Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenant. Finally, in keeping with the prediction of Jeremiah and other prophets, Jesus instituted a new covenant. Revelation shows how in the eternal

state, the covenant God dwells amid his people. In a recent book, Peter Gentry and Steven Wellum have argued that God's program can be encapsulated by the phrase "Kingdom through Covenant." So, at the very least, both creation/new creation and covenant are vital themes in Scripture.

Fourth, perhaps the most recent attempt in Biblical Theology is utilizing a *metanarrative* or story approach. That is, people look at the *story* of the Bible, the overall *storyline*, to describe its theology. In many ways, this is commendable and complements, even improves, upon previous efforts. It's possible to study the theology of the Bible book by book and then to come up with a composite picture and not to get the big picture totally right. Even when you trace the central themes of Scripture, it's possible to look at them individually, or even jointly, and not quite arrive at a full grasp of the metanarrative, the grand narrative, of Scripture. In this way, a metanarrative or story approach to Biblical Theology is an improvement.

On the other hand, it's easy to see that if looking at the big picture, the storyline of Scripture, is all we do, there are multiple ways to connect the dots. It's also possible, if not likely, that by looking at the grand narrative you'll overlook some of the plot twists and minor themes and characters in the biblical storyline. For example, you could construe the biblical metanarrative just from a few select books such as the book of Genesis, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, the Gospels, Romans, and the book of Revelation, and ignore the rest, such as the minor prophets or the lesser-known writers of New Testament epistles such as James or Jude. And what about wisdom books such as Job, Ecclesiastes, or the Song of Solomon? If you're not careful, you'll end up with what scholars call "a canon within a canon," that is, your favorite collection of biblical books—or the books that fit your construal of the biblical storyline—while neglecting or even subconsciously avoiding lesser voices or ones that are perhaps inconvenient.

That's why I recommend a metanarrative approach as the last step in a biblical-theological method but not as a substitute for a classic, book-by-book approach. In this way, if you start with a given book or corpus of Scripture (book by book), then try to identify major or central themes (central themes), and finally try to understand how these all fit together in the storyline of Scripture (metanarrative), I believe you've got the best of all worlds. You'll be well on your way to discern what is the theology of

the biblical writers themselves (as Schlatter rightly defined the aim of Biblical Theology), not just the story you've composed based on what you see to be the highlights in the biblical narrative.

Conclusion

Does all of this make sense? I certainly hope it does. In my *Themelios* article, I conclude with two important observations regarding engaging in Biblical Theology. First, we must be clear and define what we mean by Biblical Theology. Traditionally, Biblical Theology has been defined as an inductive, historical, and descriptive enterprise, to be followed by Systematic Theology. I would argue that this is the established definition, and we should stick to it. Second, we should continue to distinguish between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology. Not that one is superior to the other; both have their place. But the two disciplines are different, and we shouldn't confuse or intermingle them, or collapse the distinction. The reason why I'm saying this is because increasingly what I've seen is people claiming to do Biblical Theology while in fact imposing a systematic grid onto the Bible. Careful! Not everything that is sold under the rubric of Biblical Theology is in fact Biblical Theology, judged by the standard definition and cautions I've just discussed.

So, then, what I've done in this first lecture is define what Biblical Theology is (and what it isn't), have proposed a basic hermeneutic and method, and talked about four major approaches to Biblical Theology: book by book, central themes, single center, and metanarrative. In my second lecture, I'll try to flesh all of that out by giving several concrete examples of how Biblical Theology is done.