

# Lecture 1: The Necessity and Viability of Biblical Theology<sup>1</sup>

Graeme Goldsworthy

**Graeme Goldsworthy** is a minister of the Anglican Church of Australia and has served in churches in Sydney and Brisbane. He is a graduate of the Universities of Sydney, London, and Cambridge, and earned his Ph.D. at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. He lectured at Moore Theological College, Sydney, in Old Testament, Biblical Theology, and Hermeneutics. Now retired, Dr. Goldsworthy continues as a visiting lecturer at Moore College to teach a fourth-year B.D. course in Evangelical Hermeneutics. He is the author of many books, including *Preaching the Whole Bible As Christian Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2000), *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (InterVarsity, 2002), and *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (InterVarsity, 2007).

## Biblical Theology and the Doctrine of Scripture

I have never really considered myself to be an academic. During my working life, I have spent more years in full-time pastoral ministry than I have in full-time theological teaching. I mention this only to emphasize that my passion for the discipline of biblical theology was not only driven by the academy, but also by the perceived pastoral need for ordinary Christians in churches to be better able to understand the Bible. What, then, is required for people to understand the Bible as God's one word about the one way of salvation?

When a person is converted from unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, a number of changes take place. They are not all instantaneous and complete since some involve a process of growth and maturing. These include what Paul refers to in Rom 12:1-2 as the renewal of the mind. This is an aspect of sanctification in which the transformation process goes on throughout life. Part of becoming more Christ-like is learning to think "Christianly" about all things including Scripture. The way a new convert begins the process of developing a doctrine of Scripture cannot be stereotyped, for a lot depends on the circumstances and the Christian context in which conversion takes place. Notwithstanding the variety of experiences to which any group of Christians would testify, the common feature is that sooner

or later, in one way or another, a personal faith in Christ will lead to some kind of personally held doctrine of Scripture. The view of the Bible that has been caught or taught will form the basis for a developing understanding of, *first*, the authority and, *second*, the content of Scripture. A *third* area is, in my opinion, often left unformed, stunted, and embryonic. This is the understanding of the relationship of the parts to the whole, the perceptions of structure and, above all, the notion of the centrality of the gospel to the whole Bible.

While recognizing that there are many ways in which biblical Christianity can be compromised, even in the most ardently evangelical church, I want to view the matter before us primarily as it should affect Christians in a church that honors the Bible as the inspired word of God and as our supreme authority in all matters of doctrine and Christian living.

Conversion to Christ, then, must affect the way people view the Bible. They may have come out of militant atheism, unreflective agnosticism, self-centered postmodernism, or just plain ignorance of all things Christian. But conversion will mean that the word through which Christ is made known will take on a growing coherence and authority. Regrettably, it is true to say that in many evangelical congregations, while the authority of the Bible is usually asserted or implied, the coherence of the canon, its inner unity, is left largely to chance.

What, then, are the driving forces for

doing biblical theology, and when did the discipline emerge? Craig Bartholomew, commenting on the frequently-made claim that Johann Philipp Gabler started it all with his inaugural address at Altdorf in 1787, says, "But biblical theology, in the sense of the search for the inner unity of the Bible, goes back to the church fathers."<sup>2</sup> That is undeniable, but from where did the church fathers get this sense of inner unity? Obviously they were responding to the gospel and the apostolic testimony that they perceived in the Scriptures themselves. I suggest that the emergence of biblical theology is a feature of the dynamic of revelation within Scripture itself, and becomes evident the moment the prophetic word in Israel begins to link previous prophetic words and events into a coherent pattern of salvation history. This happens in the way the prophets, beginning with Moses, speak a "thus says Yahweh" word into the contemporary events and link it with what has preceded it. A case in point is the unfolding of the significance of the covenant with Abraham as it governs subsequent events. The events of Genesis 12-50 cannot be properly understood apart from the initial promises to Abraham and their frequent reiteration. The narrative of Exodus is in the same way taken up under this covenant. The whole course of salvation history in the Old Testament from Moses onwards is an expansion of the words in Exod 2:23-25:

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

All the subsequent events of the Pentateuch are the outworking of the Abrahamic covenant. So also is the narrative of events in the Former Prophets. The covenant is seen as the formal vehicle for conveying the reality of God's redemptive rule over his people. The joint themes of kingdom and covenant that are established with Abraham reach back to the beginning of creation and God's dealing with mankind. These themes are subsequently developed as the foundations of the matrix of revelation in the Bible.

This process of progressive revelation continues throughout the Old Testament in a way that demands our investigation of the nature of the unity of the canonical Scriptures. The rich diversity of literary type or genre in no way undermines the overall unity that is discernible. It is clear, however, that the tensions between promise and fulfillment that so characterize the Old Testament are never resolved in the Hebrew Scriptures themselves. These tensions are found in the history of Israel as it goes from Egyptian captivity to its zenith under David and Solomon, and in the subsequent decline leading to captivity in Babylon. The restoration under Cyrus fails to deliver the expected kingdom, and we are forced to look beyond for the fulfillment of the kingdom promised by the prophets. The New Testament takes up the challenge by asserting that the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth constitute the fulfillment and resolution.

The process of theologizing goes on throughout the Old Testament texts. This simply means that the individual texts, the books or corpora, are essentially books about God and his word-interpreted deeds. It is this recognition that God is the central character of the Bible that makes biblical theology viable.

Theological reflection and discourse is everywhere. God is speaking, commanding, promising, judging, and revealing his plan and purpose. In the passage of time, various prophetic speakers and writers reflect on the past, and speak the word of God for the future. The people of the Bible respond to God in different ways ranging from a deep conviction of faith to rebellious unbelief. Sinfulness and unbelief require us to make a distinction between the religion of Israel and the theology of the Old Testament. This distinction was obliterated in the history-of-religions approach that overshadowed Old Testament theology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

When we come to the Latter Prophets, it is clear that they understand the history of Israel as history under judgment because of unbelief. Their three-fold message of indictment, judgment, and hope of restoration is as varied as their historical and social contexts. But one thing they have in common is the recognition that the Day of the Lord, the great day of restoration and final salvation, is shaped by and will recapitulate the historical experience of Israel from Abraham to David, Zion, and the temple. Thus, while Israel's history is history under judgment, it is also the pattern-making medium for God's redemptive word and actions. For the pre-exilic prophets, the perspective is largely that the future restoration from exile will be the moment of fulfillment. But the restoration proves to be a disappointment, and it is the role of the post-exilic prophets to project the hope of Israel to a future coming of the Lord, a hope that remains unfulfilled at the end of the Old Testament period. This prophetic sense of the continuity and of the dynamic of salvation history

is maintained in the New Testament.

The consequence of all this is that our doctrine of Scripture, to be robust and maturing, needs to involve more than an abstract concept of authority and inspiration. It needs shape, and it is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ that gives it that shape by providing the center on which all Scripture converges. In this regard, hermeneutics intersects with dogmatics, and both intersect with biblical theology. We cannot really have any useful concept of the authority of the Bible unless we have some notion of what the authoritative word is telling us. Consistent Christian theism asserts that the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth provide the reference points for the development of hermeneutics, and the derivation of dogmatics. As the word of God must be self-authenticating, so it must be self-interpreting. Authority and interpretation both come from within Scripture. This is the only way it can be if we accept the biblical perspective on the matter. God's fullest and final word is the Word incarnate, Jesus Christ. Consequently, while the interpretation of each Testament needs the other, the primary focus is that the New Testament must interpret the Old and not *vice versa*.

We can summarize the biblical perspective in this way: God creates all things by his word and speaks to the pinnacle of creation, the human pair, in words that are intended to be understood and obeyed. The twin word-events of creation and address establish God's word as the medium of his action and communication. The rebellion of Adam and Eve is a rejection of the word of God and its self-authenticating authority and meaning. The fall is a moral revolt that demands judgment. Any redress must be

both revealing *and* redeeming. Scripture is the Spirit-inspired word that accurately preserves for us the whole process of God's redemptive word active in human history. The doctrine of Scripture as the written word of God must focus on both authority *and* structure. The doctrine of the authority of the Bible demands the task of biblical theology, which is to seek to understand both the structure and the content of Scripture. But, because, as Paul states it, "The natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14), there is the need for regeneration and the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit if one is to grasp both the authority and meaning of Scripture.

### **The Role of the Gospel in Biblical Theology**

First, in order to understand the place of the gospel in biblical theology, tentative definitions of both *gospel* and *biblical theology* are called for. One way to define the gospel is in the terms Paul uses in Rom 1:1-4. Here he states four crucial things about the gospel.

Romans 1:1 reads, "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God." The first point is probably self-evident: it is God's gospel. However, the epistle to the Romans implies that this gospel is God's solution to his own problem of how to justify the ungodly.

In the second verse, it is the gospel "which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures." It is the gospel of the Old Testament prophets and cannot be regarded as replacing or discarding the Old Testament antecedents to the coming of Jesus. It means that Jesus

is the fulfillment of prophecy, and this fact alone makes biblical theology necessary. Then, in verse three, it is the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh." It concerns the Son of God whose lineage goes back to the theologically significant figure of David. We may infer from this that, though there can be no gospel without the Father or the Holy Spirit, its focus is on the incarnate Son. This Davidic lineage also points to the structure of biblical theology in redemptive covenant and kingdom history.

Finally, in verse four, the Son "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead." The defining moment is the resurrection which, of course, implies the death of Jesus which, in turn, implies the life of Jesus. The resurrection fulfils the promises concerning the rule of the son of David. The gospel, then, is God's message of the person and work of Jesus, testified to by the Old Testament, and coming to its climax in the exaltation of Jesus.

The definition of biblical theology is harder to achieve. I can only give it to you as I understand it. Biblical theology is the study of how every text in the Bible relates to every other text in the Bible. It is the study of the matrix of divine revelation. At the heart of the gospel is the person of Jesus Christ; he is the word of God come in the flesh. The nature of the gospel is such that it demands that it be at the center of the biblical message. Biblical theology is, then, the study of how every text in the Bible relates to Jesus and his gospel. Thus we start with Christ so that we may end with Christ. Biblical theology is Christological, for its subject matter is the Scriptures as God's testimony to

Christ. It is therefore, from start to finish, a study of Christ.

How biblical theology is actually done will depend a great deal on our dogmatic presuppositions about the nature of Scripture. If we do not have confidence in the Bible as the inspired word of God, we will treat it as a collection of human documents. Liberalism killed biblical theology because it could not allow for the unity of Scripture as reflecting the one purpose of its one Author.

I must hasten to add that my saying that biblical theology is a study of Christ is not Christomonism. Jesus, as the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5), makes the Father known. Union with Christ makes us sons who are able by the Spirit to cry "Abba, Father." (Gal 4:6)

Biblical theology is much more than simply relating the events of the story in chronological order, even if accompanied by theological comment in the process. It needs to be analytical of the theological dynamics within the big story. What is the nature of the progress of revelation? Is it a gradual dawning of the light, or is it a series of discreet steps? What is the relationship between the two Testaments? In biblical theology there needs to be the kind of theological reflection that would help us to see the great recurring themes, both in their unity and their diversity. We observe the way in which the prophets deliberately recapitulate the earlier history of redemption in their eschatological projections. We seek to analyze the dynamics of prophetic fulfillment and typology.

Biblical theology is, to quote my own teacher Donald Robinson, the study of the Bible in its own terms.<sup>3</sup> As I understand it, biblical theology involves first of all the close reading or exegesis of the parts in

order to understand the theological perspectives contained. These must then be synthesized into an understanding of the unity of the theology of the whole canon. The wider synthesis will then affect our understanding of the significance of the parts. But, why should we have any confidence that such a task can be realized?

Such confidence can only come from the gospel itself. The writers of the four Gospels point the way by their handling of distinct aspects of the relationship of the person and ministry of Jesus to the Old Testament Scriptures. This theologizing of the evangelists, that is integral to their historiography, leaves us in no doubt about the conviction of Jesus and his apostles as to the unity of the biblical message with its center in the person of Jesus.

When we take the New Testament documents on their own terms, we find that everywhere the theologizing of the Old Testament is continuing, but now done in the light of the fullest revelation of God given to us in Jesus. But I think that all too few evangelicals actually reflect on the relationship of the person of Christ and his gospel, as they perceive it, to their convictions about the Bible. I refer here especially to a sense of the inner dynamic and unity of Scripture that makes it possible to speak of the whole as containing a single story. The early Christian apologists had to deal with this unity while opposing two main enemies. On the one hand, the Gnostics, such as Marcion, in order to preserve their docetic view of Christ, wanted to sever all connection with the Old Testament. On the other hand, the majority of Jews wanted to sever all connection with apostolic Christianity. Both Gnostics and non-Christian Jews solved the problem of

the theological relationship of Jesus to the Old Testament by complete separation. The Christian way of dealing with both challenges would eventually be formulated in terms of unity and distinction in the relationship of the two Testaments.

Some scholars have queried the possibility of doing biblical theology at all. Others have found a gospel-centred approach to biblical theology unacceptable. This is because the primary presuppositional stance of Christian theism is disputed. For example, James Barr comments,

Biblical theology has had its enthusiasts, who cannot understand why anyone would question its validity as a subject; it has also had its opponents, some of whom consider it to be impracticable as an area of research, or unacceptable as an academic subject, or useless to the religious community, or all three of these.<sup>4</sup>

The evangelical biblical theologian works from a hermeneutic of confident enquiry, while the sceptic usually reflects an Enlightenment attitude of suspicion. Between these two poles of a hermeneutic of faith and a hermeneutic of radical suspicion, lie a whole variety of approaches to the doing of theology either as a formal discipline or as an intuitive exercise in building some kind of personal worldview. The problem in defining biblical theology lies in the nature of this spectrum. Some reject even the desirability of attempting any kind of "theology" which implies such questionable dimensions as a God who speaks, and a canon of Scripture that is uniquely tied to the revelation of God or privileged by divine inspiration. Biblical theology is then reduced to the history of religious ideas. Others embrace the challenge with enthusiasm but qualify it

with principles and procedures that are independent of the Scriptural witness. Still others, and notably Christian theists, assert a hermeneutical spiral that builds its presuppositional base upon the biblical scenario.

This latter approach provides a starting point that is something like the following: Faith in the Jesus of the biblically presented gospel drives us to the acceptance that the biblical record overall is faithful and true. Jesus is Lord and this is his word. From this it is a short step to acceptance of the biblical claims to present the word of the living God who addresses us. The prophetic formula, "Thus says the Lord" is but one aspect of this truth claim to be God's word. Thus, the conviction of faith together with an inductive approach to individual biblical texts provide a dogmatic basis for the deductive return to the same texts and to the whole range of canonical Scripture.

It may seem logical to think of the inductive, exegetical task as a purely objective and foundational exercise upon the results of which theology is based. But, few, I think, would argue today for the notion of such an objective and presupposition-less exercise. Exegesis is a theological task that makes most sense if understood as engaged by rational beings that are created in the image of a rational God whose chosen medium of expression is his rational word. Exegesis pursued on the basis of the kind of humanistic rationalism that ignores the basis of our rationality in a rational God, but rather finds it in an irrational appeal to time and blind chance is, to the theistic mindset at least, absurd and self-defeating. As Gerhard Hasel states, "Biblical theology employs the theological-historical method which takes full account of God's self-revelation

embodied in Scripture in all its dimensions of reality.”<sup>5</sup> He points out that even von Rad recognised that the historical-critical method cannot do justice to the Old Testament scriptures’ claim to truth.<sup>6</sup>

The bottom line of this is that it does indeed make sense to pursue an understanding of the Bible “in its own terms” (as Donald Robinson, phrased it). Many of the objections to this are born of the hermeneutics of suspicion, while others are the result of the practical difficulties in dealing with such a large and diverse collection of books. Notwithstanding the early struggles to define the Christian canon, at the heart of the church’s acceptance of the Bible, as uniquely the word of God, is the self-authenticating word of Jesus. Jesus himself provides the basis for our recognition of the canon when, for example, he declares, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27). Unlike Rome, which says that the church rules the canonical process, we believe that the canonical process stems from the authority of Jesus and itself rules the church. Furthermore, it was Jesus who made the connection between the Old Testament and himself in a way that establishes the nature of the unity of the Bible.

Jesus’ imprimatur on the Hebrew canon, itself a manifestly diverse collection of books, is the essential basis for the Christian theist’s confidence that some kind of unity within the diversity of the Bible can be recognised. Once again a dogmatic presupposition begins to form which helps in the task of describing the relationship of the parts to the whole; of the diversity to the unity, and of the discontinuity to the continuity within the Bible. Faith in Jesus as the starting point for serious, believing, study of the

Bible soon involves us in the question of Christology (what it means for Jesus of Nazareth to be the Christ) and the question of theology (what it means for Jesus to be the Word come in the flesh, to be the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity). The Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the Christology of the two natures of Christ are closely related since both are integral to the gospel message. Both involve us in the recognition that unity and distinction exist together in God as the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and in Jesus as true God and true man yet one person. As some Christian apologists and theologians have asserted, the way God *is* and the way Jesus *is* show that both unity *and* diversity are equally ultimate, and that it is characteristic of non-Christian thought and of heresy to express relationships as *either* unity *or* diversity. Unity without distinction leads to fusion (for example, in the Trinitarian heresy of modalism); distinction without unity leads to separation (for example, in the Trinitarian heresies of tritheism and Arianism). This is not to deny that there are valid *either-or* distinctions: such as heaven or hell, light or darkness, good or evil.

In approaching the Bible, then, we may state a Christian theistic approach as taking its start from the gospel. In doing so it becomes involved in a hermeneutic spiral, which includes dogmatic presuppositions about God and the Bible and which tests those presuppositions by the text of the Bible itself. The unity of the Bible lies not only in the coherence of its narrative structure, but also in the fact that the whole of it constitutes a testimony to Christ and the salvation he brings. The unity of the Bible is thus a corollary of faith in Jesus Christ rather than some-

thing initially established on empirical grounds. The authority of the Bible lies not only in the fact of inspiration, but also in every text's inspired relationship to Christ who is the very truth and Word of God incarnate.

Thus, the Bible as the word of God and Jesus as the Word of God do not constitute two different words that somehow compete. There is a unity between them, in that our only knowledge of the Word incarnate is through the word inscripturate as it conveys its truth and authority through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Yet this unity is not fusion for there are also important distinctions. Jesus is not a book that we have here with us. He is not here; he is risen, and he makes himself present by his word and Spirit. He is God who came in the flesh, and he remains the God-Man in his exaltation. Furthermore, the Bible is not God, and Christians do not worship it.

Unity in the Bible, then, is seen in the claims of Jesus including those in Luke 24:25-27 and 44-45 that the three parts of the Hebrew canon are about him, or in his statement to the Jews in John 5:39-47 that the Scriptures testify of him and that Moses wrote about him. Unity is seen in the way Jesus is constantly declared to be the fulfiller of the prophetic promises, both individually and comprehensively. It is seen in the way Jesus is portrayed as the one who in the *eschaton* brings about the consummation of all things, so that the overarching story of the Bible is perceived as a progression from creation to the new creation. Many doubt the unity of the canon or that there is a theological center. But, on the basis of Jesus' own testimony we have to say that the diverse theological themes find their center and unity in Jesus himself. Paul House states it thus:

"[U]nitary biblical theology is possible because a united Trinity has breathed out these texts."<sup>7</sup>

The necessity for biblical theology lies in an analytical Christology that goes well beyond the simplistic assertion, as important as it is, that Jesus died for our sins. There are further considerations in the Christology of the New Testament that address the question of the unity of the biblical account. The comprehensive and cosmic Christ that the New Testament testifies to is a far more complex figure than the basic "personal savior" of popular evangelical piety. The question of the nature of the problem and the solution to the problem is crucial. It is sometimes asked, "If Christ is the answer, what is the question?" The gospel must show us both the problem and the answer. But it does both by its constant self-reference in terms of its antecedents in the Old Testament. Thus, it is not only individuals and the nations that need a savior, for the whole creation is under judgment and is being redeemed. Evangelicals frequently stress the importance of the new birth, but tend to do so as a purely individual and subjective experience related to conversion. The biblical theological perspective places personal regeneration within the wider cosmic scope that leads from creation to new creation.

The cosmic Creator-Christ of John 1 and Colossians 1 points to the need to understand the inner dynamics of the gospel and of salvation as they affect the whole of creation. If, as Paul indicates in Rom 8:19-23, the significance of God's judgment in Genesis 3 includes the "fall" of the universe on account of the first Adam's sin, then the last Adam comes to restore the universe and effect the new creation. The summing up of all things



in Christ that Paul speaks of in Eph 1:10 echoes his perspective in Col 1:15-20 of the cosmic implications of Jesus' being and his death. Not only is Jesus the blue-print of creation, the Creator and upholder of all things; he restores all things.

This perspective helps us to understand the New Testament pattern of eschatology. I fully realize that my understanding is not that of many evangelicals. I can only put it as I see it. Adrio König in his book, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology*,<sup>8</sup> expresses well what I understand to be the perspective of the New Testament. Paul's categories of justification, sanctification, and glorification indicate the dynamics of redemption. In making atonement for sin, Jesus dealt with the fall, not only of mankind, but of the universe. His life, death, and resurrection constituted the reassembling of reality representatively in his own person. He is the locus of the new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Though it is representative of a wider reality, it is still the power of God for salvation. The ascension of Jesus means that a representative Man is justified by his own merits so as to be acceptable in the presence of God. We are justified in our union by faith with the justified Christ and his merits. We are being sanctified through the same gospel as we are conformed more and more to the image of Christ. We shall be glorified when Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead and we shall be like him (1 John 3:2).

The implication of this perspective for biblical theology, then, is that all prophecy and promise in the Old Testament were fulfilled in Christ at his first coming. The exaltation of Christ is the final demonstration of this as Paul indicates in Acts 13:32-33: "We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers,

this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus." So, in 2 Cor 1:20, Paul asserts, "All the promises of God find their Yes in him." Thus, the end of the ages has come with Jesus of Nazareth as Paul tells us in 1 Cor 10:11. Hebrews 1:2 tells us that it is "In these last days [that] God has spoken to us by his Son." For John, the coming of Jesus means that this is the last hour (1 John 2:18). For Peter, Jesus "was made manifest in the last times" (1 Pet 1:20).

But the promises go on being fulfilled. What was representatively done in Christ, now becomes experiential reality in the world through the preaching of the gospel as it is sovereignly applied by the Spirit of God. The whole of the end has come *for us* in Christ. The whole of the end is coming in the world and *in us* through the gospel. The whole of the end will come *with us* as the great consummative event when Jesus returns in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Let me summarize this point: The gospel message concerns the historical event of the incarnation of God the Son as Jesus of Nazareth. It tells of his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension as the activity of God by which we are saved and creation is restored in him. The person of Christ as the incarnate God, the God-Man, is at the heart of the dynamics of salvation in which the one acts for the many. It is the means by which God reconnects all aspects of reality in the person of Christ and, at the same time, deals with the moral problem of disconnectedness, that is, of sin. Just as the creation fell with the sin of the first Adam, so with the last Adam, and through his cross, the creation is renewed or regenerated. The unity-distinction in Christ is the pattern of truth that informs us of all

relationships, not least of those within the biblical corpora.

The work of Christ in his ministry includes his being the fulfiller of the Old Testament promises. It is on the grounds of his word, and that of the apostles that come after him, that we accept the basic tenet that the Old Testament is a book about Christ. The events of the Old Testament and the prophetic words that interpret these events are thus testimonies to the coming Christ. The hermeneutics of the person of Christ intersect with the hermeneutics of the work of Christ.<sup>9</sup> They establish the canon as diversity within unity and as a book about Christ.

### **Challenges to Biblical Theology**

I will not here rehearse at length the details of the history of biblical studies. Suffice it to say that certain key events have affected the fortunes of biblical theology. There was, as I have expressed it in my recently published book on hermeneutics, a continual eclipsing of the gospel in biblical interpretation. Beginning with the sub-apostolic age, there was the growing dominance of dogma over exegesis and hermeneutics. Church dogma, or the rule of faith, began to determine the outcome of exegesis and hermeneutics. Gnostic and Platonic influences in the allegorical interpretations of Scripture predominated from the second to the sixteenth centuries. Then, influenced by Aristotelian empiricism, Aquinas established the basis of Roman Catholic theology, which has remained largely unchanged to the present, as essentially liberal because of his dualism of nature and grace. The Enlightenment subjected biblical studies to the latest philosophical fashions eclipsing any place for a God who speaks a word in a way that can be

understood. The Enlightenment gave us the modernism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and this in turn gave way to post-modernism.

There are two main kinds of challenge to biblical theology that I can see. The first is the disappointing rejection or neglect of it by many evangelicals. This may happen in response to poorly worked expressions of biblical theology, or because of an inconsistent evangelicalism that obscures the imperative to engage in biblical theology. I will defer further discussion of this until my third lecture. The other is the academically driven refusal to regard the Bible in the traditional way as being the inspired word of God. Ironically, many of the fine exponents of biblical theology have had such an Enlightenment view of the Bible, but they nevertheless persevered in trying to uncover the inner unity of the Bible. One such was Gabriel Hebert, an English Anglo-Catholic monk who taught at a seminary in South Australia and made a number of much appreciated visits to Moore College. His work was one of the influences on my teacher Donald Robinson and, thus, on me. Yet, in 1957 he published *Fundamentalism and the Church of God*<sup>10</sup> in which he was highly critical of evangelicalism in general and, in particular, of the *New Bible Commentary* published by the InterVarsity Fellowship in 1953. This criticism provoked Jim Packer's classic evangelical response in *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*.<sup>11</sup> Donald Robinson, who motivated me to pursue biblical theology, refers to a number of scholars who influenced his thinking; but they were not all evangelicals. He mentions C. H. Dodd and Oscar Cullmann, along with Hebert.

It is clear that we can be somewhat eclectic in our approach to scholarship.

What separates me from non-evangelicals like Hebert is not the quest for the inner coherence of the biblical story, but the theological presuppositions that govern this quest. This is illustrated in the American experience of the twentieth century. Brevard Childs, in his famous 1970 monograph *Biblical Theology in Crisis*,<sup>12</sup> attempted to understand what was perceived to be the demise of the so-called American school of biblical theology represented by men like G. E. Wright and my own mentor John Bright. He saw it as an attempt to build a bridge between fundamentalism and liberalism. He rightly recognized that there was a crisis in the understanding of the doctrine of Scripture. He went on from there in the 1970s to develop his canonical approach. In doing so, he did not, in my opinion, sufficiently come to terms with the doctrine of Scripture that he himself identified as the chief cause of the biblical theological movement's demise.

Childs was influenced by the historical-criticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet, we can only be grateful that he provided a considerable impetus in the move back to the biblical documents as we have them as the locus of theological concern. But, the lack of consensus about theory and practice continues to hinder progress. As far back as 1979, the Adventist theologian Gerhard Hasel, in a paper to the Evangelical Theological Society, wrote,

Biblical theology is today in a state of disarray. The disturbing fact that "there is no one definition of this field on which biblical scholars can unanimously agree" is highlighted by the diversity of approaches in the unprecedented volume of recent publications.<sup>13</sup>

He goes on to refer to eleven different theologies of the New Testament and at least twelve theologies of the Old Testament published in the previous decade. These, he said, reveal "basic disparities regarding the nature, function, method, and scope of biblical theology." The Roman Catholic theologian John L. McKenzie opens the introduction to his *Old Testament Theology* with this comment: "Biblical theology is the only discipline or subdiscipline in the field of theology that lacks generally accepted principles, methods, and structure."<sup>14</sup>

Charles Scobie, in referring to the legacy of Gabler, indicates that his designation of biblical theology as a purely historical pursuit allows it to be undertaken as a secular exercise. Gabler's famous distinction between biblical and systematic theology encouraged the idea that he had thus established the discipline of biblical theology and that it did not exist before him. Because his approach sat so comfortably with the Enlightenment, it led to the division of the discipline into Old Testament theology and New Testament theology, to the eventual decline of biblical theology, and then to its demise.<sup>15</sup> But there has always been a conservative minority seeking to preserve the traditional views of the Bible recovered for us by Calvin and Luther. The heirs of the Reformation have remained, usually a minority, sometimes persecuted in the academy, but tenaciously holding on to the authority of the Bible. The uneasy sense of the unity of the biblical message held throughout the Middle Ages was largely stripped of its allegorism and scholasticism by Luther and Calvin. This allowed a truly evangelical biblical theology to be reborn. At times it looked like the runt of the litter but, in the providence

of God, it has latterly grown and matured, not least in Australia and Britain as well as in North America.

Childs's 1970 monograph outlines the following problematic issues that challenged biblical theology and led to its alleged demise:<sup>16</sup>

- (1) The relationship of history to revelation.
- (2) The problem of the unity of the Bible.
- (3) Claims to the distinctiveness of biblical thought.
- (4) The distinctiveness of biblical religion.
- (5) The question of a theological centre, and the relationship of biblical studies to theology.

I believe that, while these are issues that we must all be concerned with, the problematic nature of them is largely driven by the alien philosophical presuppositions of liberal scholarship. That is why evangelicals, once they are introduced to the discipline, have usually been much more positive and optimistic about the pursuit of biblical theology.

Childs also points to the issues that Gerhard Ebeling referred to in his book *Word and Faith* published in English in 1963.<sup>17</sup> This was an attempt to redefine biblical theology and repair one of Gabler's detrimental effects by rejoining the historical and the theological elements. But Ebeling saw the theological unity of both Old and New Testaments as fragile. He also suggested that the historical discipline cannot be confined to the study of a dogmatic entity that we call the canon. In this we must part company with Ebeling. James Barr, who seems rather ambivalent about biblical theology, enumerates a number of points that various scholars have raised in opposition to the discipline thus:<sup>18</sup>

- (1) It is a purely historical study.
- (2) It cannot achieve anything.
- (3) Theology is not admissible in the academy.
- (4) It is dependent on invalid linguistic features.
- (5) It clashes with sociological and literary studies.
- (6) There is no such thing as a theology of the Old Testament.

All of these challenges, I suggest, can be counter-challenged from the standpoint of Christian theism and evangelical theology. Others have sought to cast doubt on the discipline in similar ways. John Collins<sup>19</sup> and another Roman Catholic theologian, Roland Murphy,<sup>20</sup> have raised the problem of a critical biblical theology. It seems to me that they exhibit the Roman Catholic ambivalence to historical critical studies that is generated by Thomism. Collins concludes that

Historical criticism, consistently understood, is not compatible with a confessional theology that is committed to specific doctrines on the basis of faith. It is, however, quite compatible with theology, understood as an open-ended and critical inquiry into the meaning and function of God-language. Biblical theology on this model is not a self-sufficient discipline, but is a subdiscipline that has a contribution to make to the broader subject of theology.<sup>21</sup>

More recently, David Penchansky has argued from a postmodern perspective that biblical theology is a political exercise.<sup>22</sup> With the touching assumption that we should understand his own authorial intent, he asserts that both the protagonists and the detractors of biblical theology have imposed their own meaning on the biblical text. He can only know this if he has understood their meaning and has not imposed his meaning on their texts or on the biblical text.

We do not have time to pursue these objections to biblical theology. It will have to be enough to suggest a common element in them. In saying that they all stem from a presuppositional base that is itself unbiblical is not to say that these are issues that need not be faced by the evangelical biblical theologian. I personally find reading critics like James Barr stimulating and often salutary. They remind me of things that I may be taking for granted and which remain unexamined. But, in the end, it is a question of what Robert Reymond refers to, after Archimedes, as our *pou stō*—the place “where I stand”—my ultimate reference point.<sup>23</sup>

The presuppositional position of Christian theism is set out by Calvin in the opening chapters of his *Institutes*.<sup>24</sup> More recently, Carl Henry has given a more contemporary statement in his *Toward the Recovery of Christian Belief*.<sup>25</sup> Of the same ilk are the presuppositional apologists and theologians such as Cornelius Van Til, Robert Reymond, John Frame, and Richard Pratt. The genius of Calvin, in my view, is revealed in his opening chapters in which he tackles the question of true subjectivity and objectivity. He anticipates the Trinitarian structure of the entire *Institutes* in these first few chapters. Knowledge of God and knowledge of self are interdependent. His understanding of the nature of subjectivity in relation to objectivity could well be contemplated by many evangelicals who have a propensity to the internalizing of the objectivity of the gospel. Calvin outlines his understanding in successive chapters. The knowledge of God, the *sensus deitatis* (sense of deity), is imprinted on everyman. But sin corrupts and suppresses this natural theology so that it cannot operate authentically. Hence, there is the need for

special revelation of Scripture. This witness is confirmed by the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. Word and Spirit are inseparable, and the word, to bring life must be both revelatory and redemptive. Calvin was convinced that proofs of the credibility of Scripture will only appeal to those who have the inner witness of the Spirit.

### **Summary Conclusion: The Necessity of Biblical Theology**

It is time now to draw together some of the threads of this discussion. This cannot be exhaustive given our constraints of time and space. I have suggested a number of reasons for my conviction that the pursuit of biblical theology is not an optional extra but a necessity. In summary, the necessity of biblical theology stems from the gospel. Biblical theology is most likely to flourish when we are concerned to understand all the dimensions of the gospel as they have been revealed. The gospel as theological center to the Bible implies the following:

(1) The dynamic of redemptive-history from creation to new creation, with Jesus Christ at the center, points to a distinctly Christian view and philosophy of history. The course of world history, according to the Bible, serves the kingly rule of the Lord God as he moves all things inexorably to the conclusion that he has determined from before the foundation of the world.

(2) The reality principle in the incarnation demands that every dimension of reality that the Bible expresses be examined. The reality principle in Jesus is that he is shown to be God incarnate, the new creation, the last Adam, the new temple, the new Israel, the new David, and the true seed of Abraham. We could extend

the list, but I think the point is made. The essential thing is that he is the Immanuel, God among us in perfect relationship to humanity and to all the dimensions of reality that the Old Testament presents as the typological antecedents to his coming.

(3) The conviction of faith from the apostles onwards is that in Scripture there is not a confusion of conflicting testimonies but a variegated testimony to the one saving work of God in Jesus Christ. The sense of a redemptive plan coming to fruition in Christ can be seen from the beginning of the apostolic church. Both Peter, in Acts 2:16-36, and Paul, in Acts 13:16-41, proclaim a pattern of events in Israel leading to David and then to fulfillment in Christ. Stephen's apology in Acts 7:2-53 could also be called a mini-biblical theology. In all the New Testament epistles, there is a sense of a narrative that lies behind and is implied by the theologizing and pastoral comment.

(4) The discipline of biblical theology is required by the "big picture" of the canon of Scripture as God's word to mankind. It is the *one* word given to us so that men and women may be saved and, standing firm in the assurance of their free justification in Christ, may press on with confidence towards the goal of their high calling in Christ, emboldened by the blessed hope of Christ's return in glory to judge the living and the dead, and encouraged by the vision of the new heaven and new earth in which righteousness dwells for eternity.

#### ENDNOTES

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

<sup>2</sup>Craig Bartholomew, "Biblical Theology,"

in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. K. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 84.

<sup>3</sup>D. W. B. Robinson, "Origins and Unresolved Tensions," in *Interpreting God's Plan: Biblical Theology and the Pastor* (ed. R. J. Gibson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 7.

<sup>4</sup>James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM, 1999), xiii.

<sup>5</sup>Gerhard Hasel, "The Future of Biblical Theology," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (ed. K. Kantzer and S. Gundry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 184.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>7</sup>Paul House, "Biblical Theology and the Wholeness of Scripture," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. Scott Hafemann; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 270.

<sup>8</sup>Adrio König, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>9</sup>See my *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), chapter 19.

<sup>10</sup>A. G. Hebert, *Fundamentalism and the Church of God* (London: SCM, 1957)

<sup>11</sup>J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (London: InterVarsity, 1958)

<sup>12</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

<sup>13</sup>Hasel, "The Future of Biblical Theology," 179.

<sup>14</sup>J. L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (London: Chapman, 1974), 15.

<sup>15</sup>C. H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 6.

<sup>16</sup>Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, chapter 4.

<sup>17</sup>Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (London: SCM, 1963).

<sup>18</sup>Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology*,

chapter 14.

<sup>19</sup>John J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters* (ed. W. H. Propp, B. Halpern, D. N. Freedman; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 1-17.

<sup>20</sup>Roland E. Murphy, "Reflections on a Critical Biblical Theology," in *Problems in Biblical Theology: Essays in Honor of Rolf Knierim* (ed. Henry T. C. Sun, Keith L Eades, with James M. Robinson and Garth I Moller; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 265-74.

<sup>21</sup>Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?," 14.

<sup>22</sup>David Penchansky, *The Politics of Biblical Theology* (Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 10; Macon: Mercer University, 1995).

<sup>23</sup>Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 79-85.

<sup>24</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNiell; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:1-7.

<sup>25</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *Toward a Recovery of Christian Belief* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990).