

Introduction

Let's start with a pop quiz. We'll save the right answers till the end. Three questions:

- 1. Can someone tell me what all these things have in common? The Prosperity Gospel; Liberation Theology; or Roman Catholicism.*
- 2. What do these have in common? Christian counseling or preaching that: - focuses entirely on your responsibility; tells you it's all your parents and society's fault; or which emphasizes positive thinking?*
- 3. And what about these? Characterizing the church's mission as "transforming culture"; Christian pacifism; or a view that combines the church and state (like in medieval Europe).*

The answer to all these three questions is, all these options are driven by **bad biblical theology**. Bad biblical theology is behind everything from prosperity gospel and Roman Catholicism to moralistic preaching and counseling to wrong ideas about how the church should engage culture.

To put it positively: biblical theology (i) helps us rightly interpret the Bible, (ii) protects the church from false Christianity's, (iii) is the engine of gospel-centered exposition, (iv) is the handmaiden of biblical counseling, (v) is the foundation for proper Christian cultural engagement.

Why should we study biblical theology? That's why. Those five reasons.

These reasons (and others that we'll cover in our study) fit together with the main goal for us at The Heights Church for studying this topic. Through learning about Biblical Theology, we hope to **better understand Scripture and be shaped by its story.**

Class schedule:

- 3 weeks of intro: "What is Biblical Theology"; What are the Tools; and What Role Does It Play in the Church
- 5 weeks of doing Biblical Theology together by looking at 5 Storylines of the Bible

I. What Is Biblical Theology?

Big Idea: Biblical theology is the discipline of learning how to read the Bible as one story by one divine

author that culminates in the person and work of Christ, so that every part of Scripture is understood in relation to Christ.

It's a way to read the Bible. A hermeneutic.

Turn to **Luke 24**. Jesus, after rising from the dead, met two believers on the road to Emmaus, Jesus offered a crash course Biblical Theology for them. *"26 Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*" (Lk 24:26–27)

Then look down at verse 44: *"These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."* **45** *Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,* **46** *and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,* **47** *and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."* (Lk 24:44–47)

What book is he referring to in verse 44 that must be fulfilled?

The Hebrew Bible, or what we call the Old Testament. He names the three parts as the Jews divided it: the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings (or the Psalms, for short).

Then what does he do in verse 45?

He opens their minds to understand them, apparently in a way they had not before.

And with opened, enlightened minds, what could they now understand that the Old Testament actually teaches?

That the Christ should suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations.

What striking about the beginning of verse 46?

It's those words "Thus it is written." This is what is written in the Old Testament: that the Christ should die and rise, and that will lead to the preaching of repentance and forgiveness. You can sum up what is written in the Old Testament with the 33 words that comprise the message following the word "written" in verse 46.

Let me use an illustration from the book *Reverberation*. Suppose you woke up one morning and looked at a newspaper and saw the headline, "Nationals Win World Series." And beneath that headline was, say, a 40 paragraph story of how they did it. If I then called you in the next moment and said excitedly, "Hey, did you hear the news?" You could answer "Yes," whether or not you had read the 40 paragraph story because you had read the four word summary "Nationals Win World Series." The four words sum up the news or the story in those 40

paragraphs. In the same way, those 33 words in verse 46 provide us with a headline for the whole Old Testament. In fact, they provide us with a headline for the Bible, because, just as the Old Testament points forward to this even, the New Testament Epistles point back to it.

Jesus says something very similar to the Pharisees in **John 5:39**: “*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me.*”

Okay, a moment ago I said that biblical theology is *a way* of reading the Bible. It is knowing how how to read the Bible so that every part is understood in relation to Christ. It’s having our minds opened, like those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, so that we can see how it all points to Jesus.

Now, this doesn’t mean we carelessly impose Jesus on every text. It means we pay close attention to each text on its own terms, but then how every text falls into one of countless subthemes, and tracing out that subthemes like following a tributary river, until pours into a larger river, and finally into the ocean, or the story of the whole Bible.

Listen to how Don Carson defines the subject of biblical theology: “Biblical Theology...seeks to uncover and articulate the unity of all the biblical texts taken together, **resorting primarily to the categories of those texts themselves**” (*NDBT*, 100, emphasis added). When you first open the Bible and read through it, you encounter a multitude of categories and themes and ideas: creation, law, rebellion, rule, judgment, sacrificial lamb, atonement, a special people, and so forth. Biblical theology seeks in Carson’s words to “**uncover and articulate the unity**” of all these categories.

Or Michael Lawrence, in his book *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*, simply says, biblical theology is the attempt to tell the whole story of the whole Bible as Christian Scripture. The key words here are “story” and “Christian.” The whole thing is telling **one story**, and it’s a *Christian* story, because it’s all about Christ.

Here’s one other analogy. *In the original Star Wars trilogy, what is the amazing piece of news that we discover right at the end of the second movie, Empire Strikes Back?* We discover that Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker’s Father. Wow, that changes everything. That crucial piece of information changes how you watch the first two movies, and it changes how you anticipate the third movie, as well as the significance of everything that unfolds in the third movie.

In Scripture, the identity and the work of Christ are the crucial piece of information around which everything else revolves.

So what is biblical theology? It is the discipline of learning how to read the Bible as one story by one divine author that culminates in the person and work of Christ, so that every part of Scripture is understood in relation to Christ.

A quick example from Scripture itself. Suppose I am preaching about Samson from the book of Judges. You remember Samson. He tears apart a lion with his bare hands. He kills a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. He's every Sunday School boy's favorite red-blooded biblical hero.

Will teaching about Sampson killing a thousand Philistines with a jawbone really cause people to be "born again"?

I mean, didn't Peter tell his readers that they had been "born again...through the living and abiding word of God." Certainly Judges is a part of God's Word.

What do you think?

Well, it depends... If Samson had been preached *properly*, then, yes. But rightly preaching Judges takes more than extolling Samson's virile virtues as a call to be courageous or wild at heart.

You might talk about Samson as a **type of Christ**. You would say that he is a God-anointed judge, endowed with remarkable power through the Holy Spirit, who was handed over to the enemies of God's people for the purpose of rescuing God's people (e.g. Judg. 15:14-15; 16:30).

You might ask what Samson's story **teaches us about God**—his patience with his people and his determination to judge sin? What does his story teach us about our need for a savior—for one who will not disappoint us like every judge or king who has ever lived, except one?

Samson's strength is striking. He fells a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. But how much more striking is the picture of Christ coming on the last day, with a sword coming out of his mouth with which to strike down the nations, treading the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty (Rev. 19:15)! Only this judge is perfectly just and good.

Samson's death is also striking. He defeats his enemies and rescues God's people through his death. Then again, Samson's folly and pride led to his death. Not so with Jesus, who deliberately went to his death in humility. Samson should indeed provoke our wonder, but wonder at Christ, not Samson.

In short, an expositional sermon on Judges 14 to 16 **should be a gospel sermon, not a sermon that could be preached in a synagogue or a mosque.** And the same is true of any sermon from the Bible. No matter where a text is located on the plot line, it should always be preached with the entire plotline in view. Again, each point of the plot gains significance only as it relates to the entire plot.

II. What Is the Bible (and what about the Bible makes biblical theology necessary)?

Now, there is a major presupposition or assumption I'm making in all of this: the way we read something is typically determined by the kind of literature it is. So if you pick up a newspaper, you read a news story in a certain way. And you read a news story differently than you read a novel, or a greeting card, or a direction manual for your latest piece of IKEA furniture. Each of these are different kinds of literature, and so there are different rules for how you go about reading them.

Biblical theology is crucial because of the kind of book the Bible is. What is the Bible—what kind of book is it—such that the discipline of biblical theology is crucial for how we go about reading it?

But we do biblical theology like this because of several things we assume about how God and how he reveals himself in Scripture (adapted from Vos, *Biblical Theology*, pp. 5-9).

A. God Word Was Written by Humans

Think of **2 Peter 1: 19-21**: “you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. **21** For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Notice that the verse refers to prophets as men who spoke, and when men speak, they use human language that both creates and reflects the culture they live in. What’s more, the authors of Scripture didn’t all speak the same language, live in the same place, under the same government. The Bible is an intensely human book, and to understand it, we have to understand the diversity of languages and cultures and contexts of the authors.

B. God’s Word Was Written by God

There’s not just diversity in Scripture, there is also unity because the Bible is a divine book. As 2 Peter 1:19-21 points out, behind the various human authors and prophets stood God. Paul says in **2 Timothy 3:16**, “all Scripture is God-breathed.” This is the doctrine of inspiration, a doctrine that doesn’t mean God blanked out the minds and personalities of the human authors and used them like a keyboard. Rather it’s the Scriptures own description of itself, as the product of the Holy Spirit working sovereignly through the human author.

The Bible is God’s self-revelation. What Scripture says God says.

Despite the plethora of human authors, behind the text of Scripture stands a single divine author, a single mind and will. This means that we should expect to find unity and coherence to the overarching story. The human authors may not have been able to see it at the time of their writing, but the Divine author could and did see the whole story, and wrote it so that it all fits together.

C. God’s Revealed Himself Progressively

Islam understands that the Koran was revealed to Mohammed all at once, miraculously lowered down from heaven. The sacred texts of Buddhism and Confucianism are confined to the lifetime of a single man. But God progressively revealed more and more of himself and his story over time. Scripture was written over two millennia, and its contents are not like pearls on a string, discreet and unrelated. Rather, each act of revelation followed on from what came before and prepared for what would come next.

D. God Revealed Himself in History

The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are objective events in history that not only reveal information about God and redemption, they *did something* in history. Specifically, they accomplished redemption. The Bible therefore is not merely a story told by humans about God's salvation of them, it is a drama enacted and then explained by God about God. It is "Show-and-Tell" in History. Thus in Biblical Theology we speak of redemptive history. This isn't as opposed to real history, but rather a history that is selective and focused on the unique events that make up the narrative of God's redemption of his people.

E. God's Revelation Has an Organic Character

It doesn't simply proceed like a construction site, which moves progressively from blueprint to finished building. Attach this piece to that piece. Rather it unfolds and develops from seed-form to full-grown tree. Something starts small, but then it grows, like the idea of sacrifice:

- First, it's just a burnt sacrifice whose aroma pleases the Lord with Noah.
- Then it's a substitutionary sacrifice with Abraham.
- Then it's substitutionary sacrifices that causes an angel of death to Passover with Moses.
- Then it's a substitutionary sacrifices that brings atonement in the Levitical Law.

Do you see what I mean by organic? Ideas grow like a seeds, so that their meaning expands until the originally simple truth reveals itself as complex and rich, multilayered and profoundly beautiful.

F. God Reveals Himself in Narrative

The Bible as a whole is best understood as a narrative, or single story: a story about a King, a Kingdom, and the King's relationship with his subjects. It's a story that encompasses us today. It doesn't mean to merely inspire us; it encompasses us. We're in it, so that not only do we interpret it, it interprets us, telling us who we are, and what real reality really is.

G. God's Reveals Himself in News

So the Bible presents a story, yes, but that story presents us with news! It's like the newspaper story illustration that I used above. But unlike the newspaper story of who wins the World Series, this news has dramatic implications for our lives. It's practical. Don't think that biblical theology is just for history and literature buffs. If it encompasses our lives, as I just said, it must have a word for how to live.

H. God Reveals Himself in Christ

There is a climax of the story of God's redemptive acts in the person and work of Jesus. This is the point and center of gravity of the story, as we considered above.

III. How do Biblical Theology & Systematic Theology relate to one another?

Now, when I say the phrase "biblical theology," I expect that most people *don't* think of biblical theology as the discipline of reading the Bible as one story which centers on Christ. Instead, they think simply of theology that's biblical—theology that has its source in the Bible. And this is what we typically refer to as **systematic**: theology that systematizes the truths of the Bible.

Just so that you have a sharper understanding of what biblical theology is, let me related it briefly to systematic theology.

A. What Is Systematic Theology

So what is systematic theology?

1. An Orderly and Comprehensive Summary of the Bible's Teaching by Topic

First, it is the attempt to **summarize** or systematize what the whole Bible has to say about any given topic in an orderly and comprehensive manner. Systematic theology isn't concerned with the story-line, so much as it's concerned with the bottom line. What does the Bible say about God, salvation, heaven and hell, sexuality, politics?

2. The Line Between Truth and Error, Orthodoxy and Heresy

Systematic theology seeks to formulate those summaries into precise and accurate doctrines which **define** the boundary between truth and error, between orthodoxy (right belief) and heresy. Systematic theology seeks to make normative statements.

3. Scripture Applied

Finally, systematic theology not only summarizes, organizes and defines. Systematic theology also seeks to **apply** these truths to our lives today. John Frame even defines theology as the application of Scripture to our lives.

B. How Do Biblical and Systematic Theology Relate to Each Other?

How then do systematic and biblical theology relate to each other?

Biblical theology is a mediating discipline, says Don Carson, while systematic is a culminating discipline (NDBT, p. 102-3). Biblical theology *culminates*, leads to, systematic theology.

Or let's look at the chart in your handout to walk you through this:

| Biblical Theology | Systematic Theology |
|---|---|
| Scripture as Authority | Scripture as Authority |
| Organizing principle: Historical, tracing the development of revelation | Organizing principle: Topical, logical, hierarchical |
| Starting point: Bible on its own terms | Starting point: contemporary questions |
| Provides: Storyline (news story) | Provides: Doctrine, Worldview, Application (the headline) |
| Connection: Bridge To ST | Connection: Summarizes and Rearticulates BT |

They are both helping us understand our Bibles.

- But the organizing principle of biblical theology is historical. It traces out the development of revelation. The organizing principle of systematic theology is topical, logical and hierarchical: “How do we understand the relationship between God’s three persons and one nature? What the connection between our doctrine of sin and our doctrine of salvation?”
- Biblical theology seeks to **describe the Bible’s teaching in its own terms**. Systematic theology tries to

summarize and rearticulate the Bible's teaching in self-conscious engagement with our culture.

- Biblical theology immerses us in the story-line of the Bible; Systematic Theology synthesizes the Bible's worldview into doctrine and ethics.
- One's a bridge; the other summarizes and systematizes.

There is a sense in which biblical theology provides the new story—like the 40 paragraphs of our newspaper article. And systematic theology offers us the headline—like the 4 word “Nationals Win World Series.”

C. Test Case: The Gospel

Consider how each of these disciplines help us answer the question: What's the gospel?

Biblical Theology: Creation->Fall->Redemption->Consummation. The coming of the Kingdom of God. It's the big overarching plan of God's for the World.

But how is that good news to me? Do I have any reasons to believe that I need to be redeemed? That I will be redeemed?

Systematic Theology: God->Man->Christ->Response. Here's how the grand narrative of history envelopes me and become becomes good news for me. In view of the coming of the Kingdom of God through Christ's life, death, and resurrection (biblical theology gospel), I am either condemned or saved depending on how I respond to that good news (systematic theology gospel). For there is a message that brings me into the kingdom.

You see that both of these are related and important - to see the Big Picture of What God is Doing; but also to see the Personal Application of it for Our Lives.

IV. Why Is Biblical Theology Important?

Last question: why is biblical theology important.

Biblical theology:

- “Gives us the means of dealing with problematic passages in the Bible by relating them to the one message of the Bible.”
- “Enables us to relate any Bible story to the whole message of the Bible, and therefore to ourselves.”
- “Shows the relationship of all parts of the Old Testament to the person and work of Jesus Christ and, therefore, to the Christian.”
- “Enables us to map out the unity of the Bible by looking at its message as a whole.”

(from *According to Plan*, pp. 21-24)

We'll think about this a lot more next week. But the **short answer** right now is, it helps us read the Bible rightly, so that we can engage with the world rightly. A few examples which refer back to my **opening questions**:

1) Suppose we turn to the Old Testament promises of a fruitful womb and fields, wealth and prosperity, for obedience to the law. Should we read those promises as applicable to us? Well, it depends on how you put the storyline together.

2) Should we treat the priest as a mediator who mediates for our sins through a re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice in the mass? Well, it depends in part on how you put the storyline together, and whether we need another mediator.

3) Should we expect history to get progressively better, such that our works of art and architecture, justice-seeking and neighbor-loving, will actually help to usher in the eschaton, the Last Days? Well, it depends on how you put the story together.

4) Finally, how should we preach and counsel? Moralistically? Therapeutically? Triumphalistically? Or centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ? Again, it depends on how you put the story of the Bible together.

Biblical theology, in short, is critical for knowing how to read our Bibles, which, in turn, is critical for knowing what to believe and how to live.

Let's pray.