

Biblical Theology: The Story of Scripture
Class 2: Guardian and Guide for the Church

INTRODUCTION

Last week, we introduced that idea of biblical theology. And I said that biblical theology is the discipline of learning how to read the Bible as one story by one divine author that centers on 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. It is a hermeneutic, to use a fancy seminary word.

Biblical theology traces the historical development of revelation and focuses on the Bible's own terms. It seeks to trace out the storyline of Scripture.

We talked about the importance of biblical theology, and perhaps we can start this class by illustrating how it helps us approach Scripture.

So ponder this question: *What, primarily, is the Bible to you?*

Michael Emlet in his book *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet* discusses several common evangelical approaches to the Bible that are ultimately deficient in some way.

Perhaps you can think of some of these common approaches to the Bible today. *What sort of book do people think the Bible is?*

- 1) A Book of Do's and Don'ts [**Rules**]
- 2) A Book of Timeless **Principles** for the Problems of Life
- 3) A Casebook of **Characters** to Imitate or Avoid
- 4) A System of **Doctrines**

He points out that each of these approaches allows one to use the Bible in a manner that is separate from the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ and that is not dependent on personal faith in the Gospel (Good News) of Jesus Christ.

- 1) The duty of disciplining children (rule, based on Prov. 23:13-14)
- 2) Encouragement from God's presence as you start a demanding job (general principle from Is. 41:10)
- 3) Imitation of David's courage (character example from 1 Sam. 17)
- 4) Discussions on predestination (doctrine from Eph. 1)

- from Michael Emlet, CrossTalk, (New Growth Press, 2009), pp. 25-37

Biblical theology prevents us from using the Bible in this less-than-optimal way.

Emlet later shares the following quote:

“Many of us have read the Bible as if it were merely a mosaic of little bits— theological bits, moral bits, historical-critical bits, sermon bits, devotional bits. But when we read the Bible in such a fragmented way, we ignore its divine author’s intention to shape our lives through its story... If we allow the Bible to become fragmented, it is in danger of being absorbed into whatever other story is shaping our culture, and it will thus cease to shape our lives as it should.”

- C. Bartholomew & Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story*, (Baker, 2004), p. 12

This brings us to today’s lesson. We answered *what* is biblical theology last week, and today we will think about *why* biblical theology. The short answer is: Biblical Theology Guards and Guides Churches, as you see in the title of today’s lesson at the top of your hand out. The discipline of biblical theology is essential to guarding and guiding your church. It guards churches against false stories and wrong paths. It guides the church toward better preaching, better practices, better paths.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AS CHURCH GUARD

Now let’s have some more open discussion here. We’re going to read a few verses. And I want you to tell us how people might apply them to their lives *wrongly*.

1) Listen to these two passages from the Old Testament:

“And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today...all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you...Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. 5 Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.” (Deut. 28:1-5)

One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. (Prov. 11:24-25)

How might they be misinterpreted?

Prosperity gospel churches use verses like these to say you should give generously to the teacher. If you give to me, so that I can buy the nicer car or even the jet, you will be blessed. God will reward you. And if you’re obedient, you will be blessed. Your crops will grow. Your cow will give milk. Your children will prosper. Your marriage will thrive.

2) Okay what about these few verses:

“Jabez called upon the God of Israel, saying, ‘Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from harm so that it might not bring me pain!’ And God granted what he asked” (1 Chron. 4:10).

Jesus: “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven” (Matt. 18:19).

Jesus: “And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith” (Matt. 21:22).

How might people wrongly interpret these verses?

Again, these are some of the favorite verses of prosperity preachers. They lead to a “name it and claim it” philosophy, which views God in heaven like a vending machine in the sky. And he’ll bless you with worldly healthy and wealth if you just ask with enough faith. As you may know, that verse from 1 Chronicles 4:10 was the basis for Bruce Wilkinson’s book published in 2000 called *The Prayer of Jabez*, which sold 9 million copies.

And if we were being honest, how many of us in this room have read Jesus’ words and asked ourselves, “Okay, if I just flex my faith muscles hard enough while I pray...God I do believe you will get me into Georgetown...I do believe you will get me into Georgetown...”

But is this what these verses are about? What would biblical theology say?

3) Okay, here’s another example:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15).

How might it be put to wrong use?

Jehovah’s Witnesses will use it to say that Jesus is not God and that he did not exist in eternity past. Instead, he is the first and greatest of God’s creations who then created everything else, as the verses 16 and following go on to say.

We could keep going with example after example of false Christianity’s or at least misguided Christianities. We could talk about theological liberalism. It recasts the narrative of salvation as God’s work to overcome economic injustice or the self-centered political conscience.

Or we could talk about Roman Catholicism. As in the Old Testament, they refer not to pastors or elders, but priests. Why is that? Could it have something to do with the fact that only the priests in the Catholic Churches are licensed to offer the sacrifice of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist, just like only the Old Testament priests alone could offer sacrifices. And that's what they say the Lord's Supper is, the actual body and blood of the Lord, as if he really is being sacrificed all over again. Is that right? The problem here, in other words, isn't just about specific verses, and understanding specific verses. It's about a way of reading the Bible, and putting the Old and New Testaments together, or what we call questions of continuity and discontinuity. They bring a lot of the Old Testament into the New.

Other groups don't bring the redemptive past into the present, they bring the redemptive future into the now. Once upon a time it was the perfectionist Anabaptists who thought they could bring heaven to earth right now. The progressive liberals tried this a century ago, through the social gospel. Now it is evangelicals who talk about transforming culture that offer subtle re-narrations.

Civic religion, both in this country or abroad, is often the result of bad biblical theology.

The point is, imbalanced or false gospels and imbalanced or false churches are built either on "proof texts" that pay no attention to the whole storyline of Scripture, or on whole stories gone awry. Either they wrongly connect the Bible's major covenants; or they have too much continuity or too much discontinuity between the Old Testament or New. Maybe they promise heaven on earth now; maybe they disembody the spiritual life now. Maybe they just take Bible verses and twist them to give people what they want.

The stories that some of these movements or churches or teachers tell may not be *all* wrong, but they are enough wrong to be missing key truths from Scripture.

In each case, bad or imbalanced biblical theologies proclaim a bad or imbalanced gospel, and such gospels build bad or imbalanced churches.

So super briefly, Deuteronomy 28: "If you faithfully obey...all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you." How do we read that?

We read it knowing that it was a promise given explicitly to the people of Israel but not to us. Yes, he was establishing an unbreakable link between righteousness and blessing. You must be righteous to be blessed. But at this point of redemptive history, God was teaching the people about their inability to be righteous by their own strength. Continue reading the story and you'll find out that God would have to give his people his own righteousness in order for them to be blessed.

Or what about Jesus' promises in Matthew about for anything in his name, especially if we ask with faith, then he'll answer? Well, read Matthew 18 in context, and you see it's about who speaks for Jesus—the gathered church—just like the people of Israel once spoke for God. What's more, Jesus' interest in the prayer of faith isn't about the quality of your faith, it's about whether or not you're relying on him as the object of faith.

And what does it mean that Jesus is the firstborn of creation? Does it mean he's not God but was the first creation of God? No, it means Jesus came as a new Adam to redeem the fallen human race. In that phrase we find the story of the Adam's failure, Abraham's failure, Israel's failure, David's failure, and finally our failure, and then the hope that God himself has come to recreate humanity in his own image. So how hope giving, then, to hear a few verses later: "in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:19). Oh, he is fully God. And in Christ God himself is showing us what it means to be fully human.

Biblical theology is the guard of the church. "A robust biblical theology tends to safeguard Christians against the most egregious reductionisms," says D. A. Carson.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AS CHURCH GUIDE

But biblical theology is not just a guard, it's a guide—a guide to good preaching, good counseling, good outreach and engagement, good corporate worship, even good church structures. I want to think through each of these areas

A Guide to Good Preaching and Teaching

Why do you think biblical theology provides a guide to good preaching?

When you sit down to study a text and prepare a sermon, biblical theology keeps you from proof texting or telling an imbalanced story of redemption. One friend of mine compared it to having "court sense" in basketball. You don't just focus on dribbling the ball to the hoop. You are aware of the location of their teammates and defenders on the court as well as the flow of play.

It places each text in the right canonical context, and helps you to see what your text has to do with the person and work of Christ. It wards off moralism so that one preaches *Christian* sermons. It rightly relates faith and works. It ensures that every sermon is part of the big story.

How could a study of the life of Abraham make the gospel clear? Do we simply slap an

evangelistic trailer onto the end of the sermon? “For our non-Christian friends here today, I’d like to end this message about Abraham’s circumcision by telling you about how you can receive the free gift of eternal life. Come to Jesus!” “*But he was just talking about circumcision?!*”

Or suppose you are teaching a lesson on David and Goliath. Nobody in Israel’s army wants to fight the giant Goliath who taunts them day after day. Then this young, naïve shepherd boy David shows up to bring his brothers food, refuses the king’s armor, picks out 5 stones, nails him in the forehead with one stone, and cuts off his head. What are some of the lessons people often take from this?

Well, you have 5 stones, you see, and those stand for faith, hope, love...I got two more, uh, truth and emergency preparedness. Typically, people will talk about *David*: David’s faith, David’s courage. And, how we need David’s faith in God to fight the Goliaths in our lives. Is that the right way to teach the passage. Well, it’s a part of it. But this is not a Christian sermon. A Jewish **rabbi** could teach that sermon.

Next week, we’re going to talk about typology as one of the tools you need for biblical theology. And the New Testament teaches us to read David as a type of Christ. Jesus and the apostles tell us in a number of places, like Mark 12 or Acts 2, that we’re to watch David in order to get a somewhat dim preview of Jesus. Who is David in the Goliath story? He is the Spirit-empowered and unlikely king who has come to rescue God’s people from their greatest enemy (sin). He does so by taking their place – fighting for them as Gods’ Champion. It’s not that we need faith to defeat the Goliaths in our lives. It’s that we need a David to defeat the Goliath’s in our life, and the good news is, we have one: Jesus.

In short, if you are in the Sunday gathering, a Sunday School, or a mid-week small group, you need biblical theology to do the most important thing in a church: preach and teach God’s Word.

A Guide to Good Counseling

Hopefully you can see how biblical theology is a going to be a good guide to all word ministry. But let’s think about on more form of word ministry: counseling.

A younger Christian asks us what he should do with his life. A married friend needs encouragement because of difficulties in her marriage. A church member confesses that he struggles with an addictive behavior. Your teenage daughter is concerned about being accepted at school. All of us engage in counseling. *How do you think biblical theology guides us here?*

And how you respond basically depends on what you think human beings are, what their problem is, and how the Bible speaks to it.

In a lot of those situations, we diagnose his problem as either wrong thinking or wrong behavior. For the cure, we turn to the Bible as an answer book to show them how to think right or act right. The result is a proof-texting approach, a sort of Christianized version of behavioral or cognitive therapy. The basic counsel is, “You simply need to learn, by the power of the Spirit, to think or act differently.”

The trouble, of course, is that story of Adam and Israel should teach us that you can give people all the right thinking: Adam had God in the Garden with him telling him precisely how to think. And Israel had the prophets. And you can get people to engage in the right behavior, for a while, at least: Israel had the elaborate structure of the law. Yet how well did all that succeed?

A biblical anthropology, however, doesn't finally define us by our behavior or our thoughts. Rather, we are defined by who we worship. We are fundamentally worshipers. This is graphically and perversely illustrated with Israel's worshipping the gods of the nations.

According to Paul, real change involves moving from idolatry to the worship of the true God. How does that happen? Through the gospel, through receiving and resting on what Christ accomplished on the cross. Through repenting from sin and putting faith in the grace of God held out in Jesus Christ. The Christian caught in sinful actions, destructive beliefs, or addictive behaviors is someone who is worshiping idols, as every fallen human does, and needs the gospel.

Your friend who needs guidance: Are they stuck inside indecision because they have a wrong conception of where history is heading and where they will find ultimate joy?

Your friend in a difficult marriage: is she resting hopes on her marriage that the marriage just wasn't meant to bear?

Your friend struggling with addiction: why does he think he was created?

Biblical counseling refuses to hold out false and temporary goals, like an easier or more pleasant life now, or tricks and tips for a better marriage. Rather it holds out the goal of sanctification and glorification, our transformation into the very image of Christ. Its method is therefore the gospel because Christ is the goal.

A Guide to Good Outreach and Engagement

Let's turn to a church's outreach and engagement with the world outside. Biblical theology rightly balances our expectations between expecting too much (over-realized eschatology, perfectionism) or demanding too little (cheap grace, easy-believism, belonging-before-believing, not preaching Scripture's commands).

Good biblical theology will not promise our best life now (whether that means health and wealth, transforming the city, winning the favor of the elite, or retaking America). But nor does it shy away from engaging culture and seeking the good of our neighbors in deed ministry for the sake of love and justice.

A couple of examples:

A) Missions

Lately there's been a lot of buzz about the need for the church to be missional. Being missional is not the same as being committed to missions, or being missions-minded. A so-called missional church says that the church doesn't go on mission, or send people out to do missions. Rather, the church *is* the mission of God into the world, in order to heal the world and reconcile people to God. Just like Jesus healed and fed people. So the mission of the church is to incarnate ourselves into culture and do good to others. Bless them.

So just grab Jeremiah 29 and talk about how the Jewish exiles were to care for the city of Babylon. Or grab the verses in Matthew 5 about being salt and light. Or any passage on the incarnation. Or any passage about Jesus feeding and healing people. Maybe our mission as a church should be less about putting money into overseas missions and more into building houses for the poor?

What do you think? Does that sound right?

I think there's no question that we should go and be salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13-16). I also think there's no question that God is a missionary God. He moves into the neighborhood and finds us. But notice that the whole Bible's emphasis on the coming of Jesus to do what Adam and Israel *couldn't* do! Notice how the Gospels themselves emphasize first and foremost who Jesus is, and how the Epistles call us to be united to Jesus by faith. The whole Bible emphasizes the utter uniqueness of Christ. That's what the miracles point toward.

The most important thing the church can do for the world is not anything the church can do for the world. The church cannot die for the sins of the world, or heal the nations, or usher

in the kingdom of God. The most important thing the church can do is point to the One who did and is doing all this. The church must give witness to the Son. It must proclaim his message. It must make disciples of him. The very fact that all of Scripture centers on the person and work of Christ helps us to see precisely what our mission is: point to Christ, just like the Bible does. And, yes, we point to him with our deeds. But our deeds are mute, which means we must point to him most centrally with our words. This is why Jesus said he primarily came to preach, not cast out demons or heal.

In other words, we need more than proof texts. We need to understand the whole Bible.

B) The Relationship Between Church and State

Biblical theology helps us understand the relationship between church and state. There is no more vexing question in church history than the question of the relationship between the church and the state. From medieval Christendom and the union of church and state over a single “Christian” empire, to today’s culture wars with a politicized electorate divided in part along religious lines, to fears about Islam and its refusal to organize the state along secular lines, to fears that fundamentalist Christians might make a similar refusal should they ever come to power in America—the question of the relationship between political and spiritual authority continues to cause conflict and fear.

What do we do about the example of Israel? Don’t we see there a union of spiritual and civil authority? And what about Christianity’s all-encompassing moral worldview, which declares not only the universal Lordship of Christ, but the sacredness of human life and the moral character of the universe in which we live?

Well, we need to pay attention to the entire storyline. Israel’s nation-state existence was itself to be a light to the nations and looked forward to the role the Church would later play in worldwide missions. Israel was not to be an end in itself. How you understand the role of the nation Israel and the purpose of the Church, is tied up with the story of the Covenants of Scripture (which we will look at in week 4). This will influence how one understands the relationship between church and state.

A Guide to Good Corporate Worship

Biblical theology helps us to know what to do when we gather as a church in our corporate worship.

Is David’s undressed ark-of-the-covenant dance normative for church gatherings? How about the incense used by Old Testament priests, or the use of instruments and choirs, or “making sacrifices” for various holidays, or the reading and explaining of the biblical text? A

right biblical theology helps to answer what to bring into the new covenant era and what to leave in the old.

Much depends on one's approach to continuity and discontinuity, and one's understanding of Christ's work of fulfillment. It also depends on one's understanding of what Christ's gathered church has been authorized to do.

A Guide to Good Church Structures

By the same token, the storyline of Scripture requires us to pay attention to our church structures. Should we baptize babies? Well, it depends on how much continuity you see between the Old Testament and the New.

What about pastors? Is their job description similar to the Old Testament priest? Or more like the prophet's? Or the king's? Well, the answer depends on these questions of continuity and discontinuity, as well as how prophet, priest, and king actually point most directly not to the pastor, but to Christ. So the question really is, how do pastors relate to Christ, not the Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings.

What about church discipline? Do you think there might be something to learn from Adam and Eve's eviction from the Garden, to Noah's ark, to the holiness laws and being placed outside the camp, to Israel's exile, to Nehemiah's wall?

CONCLUSION

Biblical theology as a discipline is a way of reading the Bible, a hermeneutical strategy that refuses to turn God's story into life's little answer book, but rather recognizes it as the grand story that gives our stories meaning.

That story increasingly defines who we are, where we've come from, and where we're going. As a result, it guards and guides the church today.