

The *SBJT* Forum: Biblical Theology for the Church

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Stephen G. Dempster, A. B. Caneday, and Robert W. Yarbrough have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: How does a thorough knowledge of biblical theology strengthen preaching?

D. A. Carson: Before attempting to answer that question directly, it is important to gain agreement as to the commonalities and differences between biblical theology and systematic theology. For otherwise, the peculiar contributions of the former will not stand out.

Both biblical theology and systematic theology ask questions about what the Bible means. Typically, however, systematic theology asks questions in a more-or-less atemporal fashion, and generates answers that are cast the same way: What are the attributes of God? What is sin? What is the nature of the covenant of grace? What does election mean? Who are the people of God? And so forth. Of course, if the systematician provides the answers by *using* the Bible, and not simply out of the categories of well-worn historical theology, or even of philosophical theology, then he or she will inevitably introduce some temporal distinctions. For instance, to answer the question "Who are the people of God?" in *biblical* terms forces the systematic theologian to wrestle with the both the continuities

and the discontinuities between the old and new covenants. Any systematic theology of enduring value will not forget the sweep of the Bible's storyline: creation, fall, redemption, consummation. Nevertheless, one of the aims of traditional systematic theology is to summarize, in largely atemporal theological synthesis, what the Bible actually says on this or that subject, taking into account how these matters have been handled in the history of the church, and framing our theological synthesis so as to interact with and address the contemporary world.

By contrast, although biblical theology is no less interested than systematic theology in asking and answering questions about what the Bible means, in substantial ways it operates on different principles, and achieves different results. Above all, it operates with temporal categories never far from view. There are two consequences. *First:* typically biblical theology focuses on individual books and corpora. For instance, it may not ask, "What are the attributes of God?", but "How does the book of Isaiah present God? What does the Johannine corpus contribute to what the Bible says about God? What is the structure of the thought of Chronicles,

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compared with Samuel-Kings?” *Second*: biblical theology is equally interested in tracing the principle strands of thought *through* the biblical corpora. There are about twenty of these—such things as kingship, creation/new creation, temple, sacrifice, priesthood, rest, election, grace, faith, people of God—plus many minor strands. Such tracing of strands demands not only an awareness of *time* (for these strands or trajectories develop with time) but also a resolute sensitivity to *literary genre* (for these strands show up in very different ways in the different forms that make up the biblical books). The competent biblical theologian will want to be aware of the history of the discipline, of course, and speak to the contemporary world (as does the systematician), but on the whole biblical theology is not as resolute in its address of the contemporary world as is systematic theology.

This discussion could be teased out at length, but I shall restrict myself to two further qualifying statements before trying to answer the question set me. *First*, for the purpose of this discussion, I am concerned only with those forms of systematic theology and biblical theology for which Scripture is the “norming norm.” There are plenty of examples of systematic theology which use the Bible as a selective quarry to ground structures of thought not essentially Christian or biblical—structures the systematician may well use to weed out biblical notions and texts that he or she finds offensive, or at least out of step with the system. Similarly, there are many instances of “biblical theology” in which all the focus is on Old Testament theology or New Testament theology, but not on “whole Bible” biblical theology. Worse, even New Testament biblical theology (for instance) may be organized in

such a way that the reader is told that the different books and corpora of the New Testament represent competing, irreconcilable theologies. Inevitably, that means there is no attempt at synthesis; equally sadly, although it studies each book and corpus closely, it refuses to track out the trajectories that tie the Bible together. In other words, it squanders half the heritage of biblical theology, while refusing to confess that the Bible is the “norming norm.” *Second*, in the interests of full disclosure, I should acknowledge that the kind of biblical theology that interests me, the kind that preserves Scripture as the “norming norm,” is something in which I have invested a fair bit of energy in recent years: I am one of the consulting editors of *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (InterVarsity, 2000), and I edit the series *New Studies in Biblical Theology*.

So I turn to the question set me, and suggest five ways in which this kind of biblical theology may strengthen preaching.

(1) Biblical theology is more likely than systematic theology to pay close attention to the immediate biblical context. That should be obvious simply by comparing books: although some systematic theologies burst with biblical references, many, even by orthodox writers of great gift, display only the sketchiest effort to handle biblical texts (e.g., Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* [Westminster John Knox, 2005]). That option is simply impossible to the biblical theologian. Biblical theology is *necessarily* more tightly inductive as it reads biblical texts. Moreover, it is less likely to appeal to a distant biblical “context” (i.e., the “context” of one’s entire systematic theology, determined by other texts) to explain a

difficult passage, before carefully exploring what light the *immediate* context of the book and corpus might shed on the difficulty. Along these lines, then, biblical theology encourages the serious reading of the best commentaries. All of this is very important in the regular preparation of expository sermons.

(2) Biblical theology is more likely than systematic theology to explore the trajectories of Scripture, and thus teach people one of the most important lessons about how to “read” the Bible.

An illustration may help. Suppose you are preaching from Ezekiel. You have arrived at the great passage, Ezek 8-11, where Ezekiel is “transported” in Spirit to Jerusalem, seven hundred miles away. He witnesses the horrendous idolatry of the city, and he sees the glory of God abandon the temple, and ride the mobile throne chariot (the imagery is picked up from Ezek 1) outside the city to park on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city. At some point or other it might well be worth taking five minutes or so to remind the congregation where this description of what happens to the temple fits into the entire trajectory of the temple theme. You may not have to unpack all of that trajectory (on which see Greg Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* [InterVarsity, 2004]), but you might mention the care with which God designs the tabernacle in Exodus, the significance of the Holy of Holies and of the sacrificial system, the role of the priests and especially of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, and the significance of the tabernacle for the corporate worship of Israel under the old covenant as they assembled three times a year. The tabernacle was the great meeting-place between God and his people.

Whether or not you take the time to sketch in, say, the theft of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines, or the list of different locations where the tabernacle was pitched, or the frequent corruption of its attending priests (e.g., Eli’s sons), will depend on your larger purposes. But you will not fail to mention the Glory that descended on the tabernacle. Nor will you fail to mention how, under King David, royalty and priestly function come together in the city of Jerusalem, with the temple replacing the tabernacle under King Solomon—and once again, the Glory descending with such awesome splendor that the priests had to vacate the premises. The tragedy, of course, was that in the days of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, many people thought the temple was bit like a talisman: God could not possibly let pagans destroy the city of Jerusalem and its temple, they thought, and so they were “safe.” The temple functioned, in their imagination, far too much like a powerful good-luck charm. But God was showing Ezekiel, in his vision, that God himself was abandoning the city. When Nebuchadnezzar tore the place down four and a half years later, God wanted it to be known that Nebuchadnezzar’s success was not the result of his superior strength, but the result of God’s judgment. Meanwhile, in Ezek 11, God tells the exiles that he himself will be a “sanctuary” for them: in other words, the real “temple” is where God is, not where the stonework and masonry are.

When the exiles return, then of course they are encouraged to rebuild the temple, as they are still under the old covenant that requires it. Yet there is no record of the Glory descending on it again, as in days of old. But centuries later, the one who is the Word-made-flesh calmly says,

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2). Neither his opponents nor his own disciples understood what he meant at the time: John admits it. But after his resurrection, they remembered his utterance and understood the Scriptures: Jesus himself is the temple, the great meeting-place between God and human beings. There are derivative antitypes in the New Testament, of course: the church is the temple of God, even the Christian’s body is the temple of God. Yet the account drives on further: in the culminating vision of the last book of the Bible (Rev 21-22), the people of God gather in the “new Jerusalem”—and it is shaped like a cube. There is only one cube in the Old Testament, from which the imagery is drawn: it is the Holy of Holies. In other words, all of God’s people are forever in the Most Holy Place, always in the sheer unmediated Glory, forever with the Lord. Small wonder John testifies that he saw no temple in that city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

All of this can be sketched in five minutes. But to do this once in a while, when the temple theme comes up, is to fix in the minds of the congregation one of the twenty or so great trajectories that tie the Bible together. The believers are not only being edified by the prospect of the new Jerusalem, they are being helped to understand their Bibles, to read their Bibles more intelligently, to worship the wisdom of God in bringing these things to pass to make a cohesive whole and prepare his people for the Glory. When the preacher undertakes this discipline from time to time along *all* the major trajectories of the Bible, and many of the minor ones, believers are greatly edified by the Word of God, and unbelievers are helped to understand what the Bible is about, what

faith in Christ turns on.

(3) One of the great strengths of such preaching is that it avoids atomism. Sadly, a great deal of contemporary evangelical preaching is “biblical” in the sense that it picks up on some themes from the chosen passage and applies them to life within a grid that is largely personal, psychological, relational—but with almost no connection to God himself, and only accidental connection to the gospel. In other words, the themes in the sermon are “biblical” in the atomistic sense that they surface in this one text somewhere, but the passage itself is not adequately tied to the book, the corpus, the canon—and as a result, the deepest links of these themes are entirely missed. How this passage is tied to God and his gospel are lost to view. The sermon is “biblical” in only the most superficial ways. I wish there were space to catalog a long list of guilty examples. But I am sure of this: preachers who understand how the themes of biblical theology tie the Bible together are much less likely to fall into atomism than are preachers who are not so disciplined.

(4) The habit of thinking through the magnificent diversity of the biblical books—which of course is so much a part of responsible biblical theology—is likely to help the preacher devote time and care to the way the genres of Scripture should affect his preaching. How do I handle lament, oracle, proverb, apocalyptic, narrative, fable, parable, poetry, letter, enthronement psalm, theodicy, dramatic epic? Not to think about such things, of course, may still leave you orthodox: you may find principles and truths in all of these kinds of texts, incorporate them into your atemporal systematic theology, and preach them. Yet God certainly had good reasons for giving us a Bible that is shaped

the way it is: not a systematic theology handbook, but an extraordinarily diverse collection of documents, with one Mind behind the lot, traversing many centuries of writing, in many different forms. The fact that one Mind is behind all of the documents makes systematic theology both possible and desirable, but not at the expense of flattening out and domesticating the documents that still remain the “norming norm.” In other words, good biblical theology will not only help you handle more responsibly the trajectories that drive *through* Scripture, but it will also help you focus appropriately on the message, genre, focus, and thrust of *each* biblical document. It will help to keep your preaching fresh, and value affective elements as much as logic, and proverbs and laments as much as discourse.

(5) Ironically, for all of these reasons the preacher who genuinely understands the first four points is likely to become a better *systematic* theologian—and that, too, will enrich his preaching. One of the things that makes Calvin’s *Institutes* the rich repository that it is, is the fact that Calvin was himself as much a commentator as a systematician. If one uses the biblical books as a mere proof-texting quarry for systematic theology, one is likely not only to end up abusing the texts, but to produce an impoverished systematic theology. But if the preacher reads, re-reads, and teaches and preaches the biblical books, remembering the priorities of biblical theology, his grasp of Scripture—not to say the grasp of Scripture enjoyed by the congregation—will be richly enhanced. If Scripture remains the “norming norm” for that biblical theologian, then the move toward systematic theology will also be enriched. Tie that in as well to a growing grasp of historical theology, and to

a careful and critical understanding of the culture in which we preach, and we will have the rudiments of the training of a faithful minister who does not need to be ashamed as he rightly handles the Word of truth.