

First Three Gospels, Part I

This morning, we will move on to the New Testament. We will deal with New Testament theology, not New Testament exegetical details. But New Testament theology certainly does assume a lot of exegetical work. The period between Malachi and Jesus Christ is about 420 years. That is a long time, almost as long as the history of the United States, 95 years after Columbus discovered America until now. That is the length of time between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New. There is a lot of material written in that time, the inter-testamental writings to which many critical writers appeal for an understanding of the New Testament. Paul helps us to bridge the gap when, writing to the Galatian church, he said (4:4-7):

But when the time had fully come [or: in the fullness of time], God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

To take that out of the whole biblical context would certainly give you the wrong impression. You would not be able to interpret this passage if you did not see it in its Old Testament context. I do not want to go into detail on this now, but again, Paul ties this in with the Old Testament. We will spend some time on that today. Let us pray.

*Lord, our God, grant that we may be able to concentrate on the material before us. We pray that the work of the seminary can go far beyond the immediate halls of learning here. And now we pray that You will bless us as we spend the last part of this semester looking at the teaching of the New Testament and how it relates to the Old. God bless us together; give us joy in our work for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Empires grew strong. Empires came and empires went. Malachi was in the Medopersian Empire. The Egyptian Empire remained a dominant empire, through various circumstances and in varying ways. Jesus' parents never would have fled there with Him had Egypt not been an area of strength and protection. The Grecian empire came and went. The Roman Empire came in about 100 years before Christ. Empires came, empires went, but the kingdom of God continued. But there was progress in the developing of that kingdom and there was a further unfolding of God's covenant. And He of whom the Old Testament had spoken so eloquently came on the scene, the mediator. I submit that New Testament theology deals with these three main concepts. I will be referring to them again as we move along. You will find much discussion about the character of New Testament theology. There is a tremendous debate about it, even more so, it seems to me, than there is about the Old Testament. Are we to consider New Testament theology basically an historical and a descriptive discipline? Are we simply to follow through the history of thought and describe the people and what they thought? That is the Von Rad approach in the Old Testament and you will find different New Testament theologians wanting to take this historical descriptive approach. It is almost a secular approach. Then there are others who insist on taking the salvation historical approach, and that seems good too. It is the history of salvation.

I find it very interesting that Howard Marshall, in his book *Jesus the Savior* (1990), gives a review of different theologians. He includes a criticism of Ladd, which is surprising because Ladd is highly respected, almost next to the Bible for many New Testament theologians and evangelical seminaries. Marshall says that while Ladd does use the salvation historical approach, he does not give us a full and proper setting. Ridderbos wants readers of the New Testament to understand that the New Testament is more than just a history of salvation, salvation history. It gives us the history of the kingdom, the

kingdom that was spoken of in the Old Testament. The kingdom of which the king, the Christ comes. Redemption is a very important part of that, no doubt. So there are writers such as Marshall and Ridderbos who say that just to take the salvation historical approach is not satisfactory. You are not doing full justice to the New Testament if you take just the history of salvation, the salvation events. You have to put them in the fuller context. You have to put them in the context of the Roman world within which these people wrote, within the context of God the sovereign ruling over the nations as He did in Old Testament times. So get the broader picture if you want to understand the full New Testament message.

Then there are those who say that the best way to approach New Testament theology is to look at the different writers and talk about the theology of Matthew, the theology of John, the theology of Luke, the theology of Paul. They also talk about a theology of Peter and of James and of Jude – as if the New Testament were a collection of theologies. There is no doubt that each writer had his unique emphases. But the core of their theology was the same. In their particular circumstances with their unique gifts and different audiences, they give unique expression to the Gospel message. They were speaking to the people that they were particularly concerned about—Paul to his different congregations, James and Peter to a general audience, etc. Yes, they did give unique expression to the Gospel message of the kingdom of the Christ and how to live in obedience to the Christ within His kingdom. So we can look at what the different men said and their unique approaches and emphases, but to speak of the New Testament as a series of theologies makes me uncomfortable. I hope it also makes you uncomfortable, because there is not a series of theologies. There is one *theos*, *logos*, one Word of God that comes to us in the richness of the entire 100 years of the New Testament period.

There is much discussion about how the New Testament theologies relate to the Old Testament. I already referred to that when I said that many of the liberal writers go particularly into the inter-testamental period. They go to these apocalyptic writings as often as they go to the Old Testament writings. You have to see a man in his context. You have to see Jesus and John the Baptist in their context. What was their context? It was the Roman Empire. Prior to the Roman Empire, what was going on in the 200-300 years before Christ? There was all that apocalyptic writing, that pseudopigrapha writing. There were these different concepts of what the kingdom was to be, how Israel was to be delivered, and what the phrase, “Kingdom of heaven,” or “Kingdom of God,” really meant in Judaic writings. Many liberal scholars try to project that which came out of the inter-testamental period onto the New Testament mind, and do not pay much attention to what the Old Testament itself says.

Now one thing that I have appreciated about Ladd is that he, and Ridderbos, and Marshall, and Guthrie point out something important. You will never understand John the Baptist, Paul, or other New Testament characters; you will not understand what their conception of God is, what their conception of the Christ is, what their conception of the covenant is, or what their conception of the kingdom is, unless you go to Moses, the poets, David, Solomon, as well as the pre and post-exilic prophets. So the relation of New Testament theology is to the whole Old Testament.

But evangelical scholars such as Ladd pay very little attention to what actually goes on in that 420 year period between Malachi and Jesus. How much of that do we actually study in an evangelical seminary such as Covenant? There is no course on inter-testamental times. I pled for one at Reformed Theological Seminary, but it fell on deaf ears because it is not a period of inspired revelation. But it nevertheless forms part of the background of the New Testament, because Jesus and the New Testament writers were all members of the Jewish community that came out of that inter-testamental time. Thus we should pay some attention to these, perhaps reading an apocryphal book once or twice. You will find some parts inspiring, some parts rather dull. But those books do help you to understand the historical background,

the literary background of the New Testament. But I would not say that they had a real impact on the message of the New Testament.

Our approach as we study the New Testament will be as with the Old Testament. I maintain that to see the overall picture of the New Testament, we have to follow what we found in the Old Testament. If we are going to see the New, we have to follow what is in the Old. The kingdom is the setting. Books written on the first three Gospels often include the term “the kingdom” in their titles, such as *The Coming of the Kingdom* by Ridderbos. Ladd’s first 170 pages deal with the kingdom. This is a very important, all-inclusive concept.

I want to stress first of all when we deal with the threefold mitta, that complex of three concepts, do not drop your Old Testament. The New Testament is the fulfillment, the further outworking, the development of what the Old Testament has presented. We know it is true that the Old is fulfilled in the New and the New cannot be understood unless you look back to the Old Testament. The New Testament presents the development of Old Testament concepts and is a record of their fulfillment.

I want to point out that not all three of the basic concepts are mentioned by name in certain contexts where we think these words ought to be used. It is like in the first five chapters of Genesis, which we say deal with the covenant of creation, but the word covenant is not there. I think that is one reason why Marshall, the great New Testament professor in Scotland, wrote about observations about the covenant in the New Testament. He says, “Our discussion has confirmed the basic tenet of Reformed theology that there is but one covenant of grace in the Old Testament and the New Testament alike.” One covenant. In his essay on Kingdom he says that even though the term “kingdom” is not used often, it is the base of practically everything the New Testament teaches. Similarly, just because the term “covenant” is only used a few times, 33 times specifically, does not mean that you can say, “Oh, we can drop the covenant idea now because Jesus is the great center.” “Oh no,” says Marshall, “You will never understand Christ properly unless you see Him in that context.” You have to keep in mind that when Jesus was sitting at the table with His disciples and said, “This is the blood of the new covenant,” He was presenting Himself as the great covenant mediator.

Now the term “mediator” is not used often. Messiah and Christ are used often; Christ the Messiah. But the idea of the Messiah as mediator comes through only sporadically, but at very crucial points. The mediator is there so we have the three concepts (the mediator, the kingdom, the covenant). The Greek word *diatheke* puts the emphasis on the unilateral character of what the New Testament presents concerning the relationship between God and His people. The term *diatheke* can be translated “testament” or “testimony,” as well as “covenant,” “bond,” or “contract.” That bond, that bond of love and life, is unilaterally and unconditionally established.

I see three epochs of revelation beyond the Old Testament epochs. I call the first one, “The New Testament Introduced.” This includes John the Baptist and Christ’s birth. The second epoch is “The New Covenant Established,” which is Christ’s ministry, including His death. Then after Christ has been resurrected and ascended with Pentecost, we get the third New Testament epoch of revelation. This is especially that which is mediated through the apostles, those going out preaching in the New Testament era and all their writings. Thus there are three epochs: the new covenant introduced, the new covenant established in the ministry of Christ, and the new covenant developed with the apostles after Pentecost.

Vos says, speaking about the structure or method of doing New Testament theology, “There are three ways in which the structure of New Testament revelation can be determined from within Scripture itself.” To add “from within Scripture itself” is essential. The Scripture determines our method. The

Scripture determines our approach and the goal to which we aim. We dare not impose upon the divine process of revelation and its product from any outside source. We ought not lay a grid on the New Testament that is thought of from outside of Scripture. Scripture has to present it, Vos says. Do not go to outside sources. Go strictly and only to Scripture itself. Vos also says, "If you want to know the structure of the Old Testament, you have see the indications from the Old Testament. You have to listen to the teachings of Jesus and you have to listen to the teachings of Paul and the other apostles."

The Old Testament, Jesus, and the apostles are your sources. Your method then has to be scriptural. Study all of Scripture to determine what you will understand and what the content will be of New Testament theology. I want to emphasize that our method will be that which has often been referred to as historical, progressive, organic, or adaptable. God revealed Himself in history. The New Testament gives us history. He did it progressively. He moved on. It was not static. He did it organically. John the Baptist says, "Repent and seek forgiveness, for that is your entrance to the kingdom." That is a crucial concept there at the beginning of the New Testament which is picked up from the Old and carried on throughout the New; it is very adaptable. Scripture was written by men, and that is one reason why people can speak of the different theologies. As I said before, each of the writers spoke as he was gifted, and wrote as he was able, to the specific context in which he was working.

When we study historically and progressively, we run into a debate as to which books we are to work with. How are we to work with them and which ones? The order in which we have the books in the New Testament is not the order in which they were written. No one knows for sure which is the first book. There is evidence that there were some pre-Pauline documents to which Paul refers in his letters which could be the first things written. However, this cannot be proved. Marshall refers to them, and some of the other writers refer them to because Paul refers to them. But nobody knows when Paul wrote them. Some assumed that Paul was writing soon after his conversion, within a couple years.

But what is the order of the New Testament books? Many say James is first. James, and then 1 and 2 Thessalonians followed closely with 1 and 2 Corinthians, then Galatians, then the four prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon). But was Mark the first of the Gospels? Many New Testament scholars think that most of the epistles were written first, and then all this theology about Christ, this discussion about Christ and who He was, had to be filled in with the background and His coming and what He actually preached. Many scholars claim that Mark was written first and Matthew and Luke were dependent on Mark, but no one can prove that. Then, according to these scholars, come Peter and then 1 and 2 Timothy, John, his Gospel and his letters, and the book of Revelation.

Is that the order in which we should develop our theology of the New Testament? If we do it from that point of view, then we do it from the point of view of how it was understood and how it was written. Then we are dealing more with theology, rather than with the historical process of revelation. If we follow the truly historical, progressive, organic, adaptable, revelatory process then we will start with John the Baptist, then go to Jesus' ministry, Pentecost, and to the establishing of the church. In the context of the church being established, the letters start coming, but Acts only takes us up to Paul in prison. We do not know exactly how long Paul lived after the Acts account closes, but we do know that beyond that we have Peter and John and Jude writing. So what order should we follow? Do we follow the theological development or should we follow the historical progression? We ought to follow the order of the historical events rather than what we may assume to be the theological development. We must begin with the Old Testament, which we have done, and then we look at Jesus' ministry, which we will be doing. Then we will move on to the establishment of the church and the Pauline epistles. If you want to put all this material that you are studying in the seminary into a proper New Testament setting, follow that order.

Now we actually get into New Testament theology, having dealt with some formal problems and discussion. In the synoptic Gospels it is John the Baptist who introduces us to the kingdom. John the Baptist, an Old Testament prophet and a New Testament preacher, if I may put it that way. I am most comfortable with that description. His prophetic work ties in with the Old Testament; he is Elijah the second. He stands at a transition point. It is John the Baptist who says, "The kingdom is at hand," or "near," as the New International Version says. He does not say "It is here," or "It has come," but, "It is close." Just as the Old Testament prophets had pointed ahead to the future, John the Baptist points to that which is coming. It is there, but not yet fully come. It is at hand; you can almost reach it, but it is not yet there.

John the Baptist preaches, in a way, as a New Testament preacher, but he is in the Old Testament era. What I find interesting is his birth, according to Luke 1:17: "And he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of righteousness, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." When his birth is announced, he is tied with Elijah and his task is announced. He must prepare the New Testament audience for the Messiah, for Christ, in the spirit of Elijah. When John the Baptist's father Zechariah is able to speak he says (Luke 1:70-76), "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins because of the tender mercies of our God." At the birth of Jesus Zechariah knew the relationship of Jesus Christ to John the Baptist. He knew the relationship of John the Baptist to David. He knew the relationship of John the Baptist to the covenant. Zechariah, the priest, saw his son administering to the son of David, bringing to fuller expression the covenant that God had made with His Old Testament people. Then when John comes on the scene, having been presented in that way, first by the angel of the Lord and then by His Father, John comes preaching and he preaches repentance. He preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and he is the one who says, "The kingdom is at hand."

Now repentance is certainly an Old Testament theme, *shav*, "be sorry," "return," "turn about." Matthew 3:2,8. Mark 1:4, Luke 2:8, "Repent." The call went out to the scribes and the Pharisees and the priests as well as to the average people. The New Testament period thus begins with a call to repentance. There had to be a change of heart, a change of mind, and a change of direction. But along with repentance came the absolute assurance of forgiveness. God would forgive. Recall Micah, who speaks of a God who forgives and forgets.

Why does John preach repentance and forgiveness? It is the only way to enter the kingdom. There is no other way to become members of the kingdom that David represented, the great cosmic redemptive kingdom. It is the only way to get out of the parasite kingdom in which people are bound from their birth and by their sin. They have to turn from the parasite kingdom to the kingdom of life. Turn, confess, repent and God will forgive you and He will wipe the past and you will become members, servants, blessed inheritors of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus. This is represented by John the Baptist for he preached the Messiah too. Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:16 and 17: "Behold the Lamb of God, behold the Messiah, behold the greater one. He is near; He is coming." When he is baptizing he says, "He is here." And then John recedes, "He must increase and I must decrease." Forgiveness, repentance are necessary to enter the kingdom, to become servants of the Messiah, the king.

John also preaches the baptism with spirit and fire. "This Messiah will be a judge. He will be the one who will give us the Spirit of God, or He will give us the fire of God. The Spirit will enable us to repent, to receive forgiveness and to become blessed inheritors of the kingdom, or else we will come under the

fire of the judge. It will be one or the other. We will be the fire of the spirit or we will be the fire of judgment. John does not mince words. He puts this all in the context of the kingdom, that God the sovereign one is reigning.

These, then, are the basic concepts in his preaching: repentance, forgiveness, the Messiah, the baptism with fire and spirit. That is the curse or the blessing of the covenant. He does not use the word “covenant,” but implicitly it is there. There are some who say it is the only way his preaching makes sense. He ties in with the Old Testament. Moses spoke about the curse and the blessing. The prophets preached that all the time. The poets were aware of the wrath of God and the love of God. Oh, the blessedness of being under the love of God! And what a blessing it is to come out from under the wrath of God.

To sum up, the kingdom is here in the person of the Messiah. His work will begin. He will reign and He will judge. He will bless and He will give clear expression to the curse of the covenant. The kingdom is here. The Messiah is here and He is administering through the covenant. We will continue discussing Jesus’ ministry and dealing with the idea of the kingdom, covenant and mediator in the first three Gospels next time.