

## Lesson 13: Putting it all together for the Local Church (64)

### Introduction: What else does Biblical Theology have to do with the Church?

In lesson 12 we considered how Biblical Theology impacted our approach to teaching and preaching specific texts of Scripture. We thought about how to get from a particular text, to the larger biblical-theological threads that run through that text, so that when we exposit the text we do so in a way that connects the text to the rest of the Bible, and that applies the text in a way that's appropriate to where we stand in redemptive history.

But while Biblical Theology is crucial for faithful preaching and teaching, that's not where its importance ends. I think it's fair to say that *everything in the life and ministry of the local church is affected by a proper understanding of Biblical Theology*. As we'll see, sometimes Biblical Theology helps to guard us against error in our approach to ministry. In other cases, Biblical Theology helps to set proper boundaries and goals for our life and work together. What I want to do with our time this morning is to work through with you several different examples of this. We won't by any means exhaust the application of Biblical Theology to the church, but at the least we'll have a chance to think together in a way that will allow you to continue to apply what we've learned long after this class is over.

*We're going to look at how Biblical Theology shapes our thinking in three different areas: Counseling, Missions, and Church/State relations.*

### COUNSELING

One of the things that all of us do as members of a local church, whether we think about it or not, is engage in biblical counseling. A friend shares a problem with us and asks for advice. A younger Christian we're mentoring asks us for counsel on what they should do with their life. A married friend needs encouragement because of difficulties in his marriage. A friend confesses that they struggle with an addictive behavior. Your teenage son is concerned about being accepted at school.

*How do you decide what to say in situations like these and countless others? Well, the short answer is: it 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, the temptation is to treat the person as the sum of either their thinking, or their behavior, to diagnose their problem as either wrong thinking or wrong behavior, and to treat the bible as an answer book to show them how to think right or act right. It leads us to a proof-texting approach to both diagnosis and prescription, and generally results in a sort of Christianized version of behavioral therapy. And the result is that our approach is to say, "We simply need to learn, by the power of the Spirit, to think or act differently."*

But is that in fact what a biblical theology of the human being and the human problem leads us to? Absolutely not. A biblical anthropology begins with humans created in the image of God in order to worship God by reflecting back to him his glory through our lives. Therefore, we are not finally defined by either our behavior or our thoughts. Rather, we are defined by what we worship. We are fundamentally reflective beings.

That image was distorted and marred in the fall, so that now we freely and habitually worship the creature rather than the creator, and our favorite creature to worship is ourselves. So our problem is one of idolatry, disordered worship.

What's more, biblical theology helps us see that while Adam and all his progeny are created in the image of God, we are modeled into the image of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is the true image of God in all its fullness. So our goal isn't to be better adjusted in our thinking, our goal is to be conformed to the image of Christ, something accomplished only by the Spirit through the regenerating power of God in the gospel. Now, the Spirit unites us to Christ, so that the life we live is His life. One day, we will see him as He is, because we will be like him!

So what does this mean for counseling? *It's not satisfied with merely fixing behavior or ideas. Rather, it aims at the heart, the seat of worship. It's not content with a change of behavior that plasters over the real problem of a heart that is worshipping an idol. It also understands that change of behavior and thinking fundamentally flows from a change of love and worship. And that change comes therefore only by repentance and faith.*

B.B. Warfield wrote, *"The fact is, the views men take of the atonement are largely determined by their fundamental feelings of need—by what men most long to be saved from. And from the beginning three well-marked types of thought on this subject have been traceable, corresponding to three fundamental needs of human nature as it unfolds itself in this world of limitation. Men are oppressed by the ignorance, or by the misery, or by the sin in which they feel themselves sunk; and, looking to Christ to deliver them from the evil under which they particularly labor, they are apt to conceive His work as consisting predominantly in revelation of divine knowledge, or in the inauguration of a reign of happiness, or in deliverance from the curse of sin."*

It also refuses to hold out false and temporary goals, like an easier or more pleasant life now, or tricks and tips for better behavior. Rather it holds out the goal of sanctification and glorification. And its method is therefore the gospel because Christ is the goal.

## **MISSIONS (65)**

Lately there's been a lot of buzz about the need for the church to be missional. To be missional is not the same as to be committed to missions, or to be mission-minded. *To be missional is a way of thinking about the church and how it relates to the world. A missional church understands 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.* As a result, the church is not so much entrusted with a message about Jesus' work on the cross to proclaim to the world, but rather is called to incarnate the words, deeds and life of Jesus in every corner of our region.

Where have people come up with this? To be honest, it's arisen out of an attempt to think about mission and the church from the perspective of biblical theology. What they've noticed is that *God is a missional God—he moves into the neighborhood, he incarnates Himself in our world, in order to redeem us, and in order to establish his Kingdom. From afternoon walks in the Garden of Eden, to the Tabernacle in the midst of the Israelite camp, to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, to the final words of Revelation, God has consistently sought to be with his people, to be in their midst, and far from preventing it, human sin has made this missional orientation all the more imperative.*

What do we make of that? Should Biblical theology lead us to scrap our missionaries and set up tutoring centers and health clinics instead? Or should we be more focused on going to places like Starbucks and

park benches to evangelize, rather than renovating this space so that more people can “come and hear” the message of Christianity?

I think there’s no question that we should go and be salt and light in the world. I also think there’s no question that God is a missionary God—he doesn’t wait for us to find him, as if we could. Rather he moves into the neighborhood and finds us. But the question of what the church should be, and how she should think about mission is not the same as recognizing that the Incarnation is the fulfillment of God’s Old Testament missionary activity.

To begin with, *we understand that a Biblical theology of the church and her mission includes a separation and distinctness from the world, in order to display both the wisdom and the holiness of God.* This is seen clearly in the calling out of Israel, and it is taken up and intensified in the life of the church. Incarnational ministry, whatever it means, does not mean accommodation to the world.

Second, while the church, like Israel, is given an incarnational identity—Israel is the Son, we are the body of Christ, the church is also given a specific mission by Christ her head. She is to make disciples, she is to preach the gospel, she is to teach disciples to obey everything Jesus has commanded us. Again and again, the emphasis is placed on the message that she is to proclaim, just as again and again, Jesus prioritized the message he was sent to proclaim. Part of the pattern that emerges therefore is that while Israel and the church point to, foreshadow, and even repeat and magnify some aspects of Christ’s incarnational ministry, other aspects of Christ’s ministry remain unique to Him. The church does not die for the sins of the world, she is not given for the healing of the nations, she does not usher in the Kingdom of God. These are things that are uniquely given to the Son. So what does the church do? She witnesses to the Son. She proclaims his message. And she displays within herself the life of the Kingdom, like an outpost of heaven that the Son is accomplishing within her.

And like Jesus, the church is sent into the world to proclaim this life giving, Kingdom inaugurating message. So should we be missional? Well in one sense, yes. We should be salt and light in the world. But does that mean we should stop sending out missionaries? Does that mean that we should stop focusing on the public proclamation of the good news in order to focus on incarnating the life of the kingdom of God in our community. Absolutely not, for that would not only be to disobey the explicit command of Christ, who is the head of the body, but it would also be to erase the distinction between the type and the antitype, the picture and the real thing.

What’s more, it would be to miss another thread of the biblical story, the story in which the kingdoms of this world are not only blessed by the presence of the Kingdom of God, but actually become the Kingdom of our Lord and Christ. The story in which the nations divided at Babel and figuratively reunited at Pentecost, are finally and forever made one in a new heavens and a new earth. The story in which all nations on earth are blessed through Abraham because a great multitude “from every nation, tribe, people and language” stand before the throne in robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb. (Rev. 7)

## **CHURCH & STATE RELATIONS (66)**

*There is no more annoying question in church history than the question of the relationship between the church and the state. That it attaches to Christians is all the more amazing given Jesus’ reply when the authorities presented him with a classic formulation of the problem: Should we pay taxes to Caesar?*

*Holding up a Roman coin, stamped with the image of the emperor, Jesus replied, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Problem solved, right?*

But what about the example of Old Testament Israel? There we see a union of spiritual and civil authority? And what about Christianity's all-encompassing moral world-view, 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? Don't these truths argue for the obligation to pursue an explicitly Christian state?

The answer in some ways is related to the discussion we just had. Pay attention to the entire storyline. The kingdom of God is the goal of creation. Israel was not a prototype, but a picture, a type. When the Kingdom is inaugurated in truth, it is small, even invisible. But the spiritual kingdom is defined not by political borders, but rather by a spiritual rule, a reign, THE saving reign of God. The church is called to be a witness to that saving reign, but she isn't the kingdom. Rather she looks in hope to the King's return, when he will establish his Kingdom visibly and with power. In the mean time, our life in the kingdom is hidden, obscured and veiled, just as Christ the King was in his Incarnation. Earthly political authority is established by God, temporary and limited, but nonetheless legitimate. Separate spheres of authority and responsibility are established, until the last day, when all authority is submitted to Christ and he is publicly declared King and Lord.

Let's pray.