

Lesson 5: The Tools That Are Needed (22)

Systematic Theology Tools 1

INTRODUCTION: OUR WORK ISN'T OVER

For most of the last four lessons, we've been considering some of the specific tools that we use to build a biblical theology. We've looked at exegesis, and reading a text in context. We've thought about genre, and the impact various literary forms have on meaning and interpretation. We've talked about the covenants of Scripture, the structure they give to the Bible, both historically and theologically. We've considered the various horizons of interpretation at the level of text, epoch and canon. And we've considered the glue or threads that hold the whole story together—the prophetic nature of Scripture in its dynamic of promise and fulfillment, typology as a sort of providentially prophetic ordering of history itself, and the tension between continuity and discontinuity as God's revelation progressively and yet organically unfolds and develops from seed form to full flower.

Now at this point, it's tempting to think that our work is over. If we put all these tools to work correctly, so that we come to understand the whole story of the whole Bible, how each part relates to the others and culminates in Christ, won't we have both a biblical theology and a theology that is biblical? Won't we have what we need in order to both understand our Bibles and live faithful lives in light of the Biblical story?

These days there are some that would say yes. There are many people, especially in the emerging, postmodern church, that are far more comfortable with reading a “meaningful story” in scripture than they are with the category idea of reading propositional truth. For them, the idea of there being propositional truth is offensive. It's so narrow, so static, so totalizing, so final. As if nothing else needs to be said on the matter. In contrast, they point to the open, dynamic, relational character of story. Story conveys truth and meaning, but it also invites you in and asks you to respond, so that your response becomes part of the significance of the story. The same story can be heard by different people in different ways at different times, and doesn't require that one hearing be better or more right than the others. In fact, they say, story and narrative, unlike propositions, produce a conversation that leads to new and further insight. Propositions on the other hand go nowhere and generally just produce argument, division and oppression as I try to force you to agree with me, or vice versa. This is why Rob Bell titled his book *Velvet Elvis*. It's a book about Jesus and the gospel and the Christian life. But just as no painter who has attempted to paint a portrait of Elvis thinks he's produced the definitive portrait of Elvis, but just his own perspective, so Bell's not claiming to say anything definitive about Jesus or the Christian life. It's just his perspective, and he's inviting you to bring your perspective to the conversation. It sounds pretty humble, and if you're of a certain temperament, it sounds downright attractive.

So you can see why in this sort of cultural context, Biblical Theology, which is all about the story of the Bible as a whole, is preferred in some circles over and against Systematic Theology, which is thought of as narrow and dogmatic. These folks are fond of pointing out that God didn't reveal himself to us in a systematic theology, but through history. They point out that the majority of the Bible is narrative and that many of the concerns of systematic theology seem quite distant from the texts of Scripture themselves. So, it's said, we don't come to know and understand God by memorizing his attributes as outlined by systematic theology. We come to know and understand him by encountering him in the stories of the

Exodus and the Exile, which allow us to experience his power, his faithfulness, his love, and his terrible wrath.

Well, as attractive as this might sound, and despite the fact that there is an element of truth in what is being said, it's been the conviction of Christians since day one that in fact, biblical theology is not enough if we are to know God and live lives that are faithful to his self-revelation in the Bible. So far, the tools we've examined help to provide a biblical theology. But *if we are also to have a theology that is biblical, if we are to know how to apply the truths of the biblical story to all of life and every other area of human thought and endeavor, we will also need the tools of Systematic Theology. And that's what we're going to spend the remainder of the next two lessons considering.*

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY & SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY (22)

What we need to do first is lay down some definitions. What is biblical theology? What is systematic theology? How are they similar, how are they different, and how should we think about relating the two of them together?

Biblical Theology

Let's start with Biblical Theology, since that's what we've been talking about, more or less, since lesson one began. You may remember that in our opening class I said that Biblical Theology is not only concerned with what the Bible teaches, but how that teaching is progressively revealed and progressively develops over the course of history. We've come to the point though where a more precise and formal definition is needed. If only it were that easy. If you look up the history of the term 'biblical theology', you'll find that almost as much has been written about what biblical theology is, as there has been biblical theology written.

We don't need to spend any time on the definitions that are largely confined to scholarly debate and the seminaries. Instead, let me offer you a few that seem to best cover it from among those who hold a high view of Scripture.

Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible. So what does that mean? It means that Biblical Theology is concerned with revelation, not as this [hold up closed Bible]—"the finished product of [God's self-revelation]", but as this [leaf through the pages of the Bible]—the actual "divine activity" of God in history to accomplish his purposes. So for Biblical Theology, revelation is what God does, not so much what he's given us. That means that one of the fundamental characteristics of Biblical Theology is that its principle of organization is historical, it moves along the axis of redemptive history. It's particularly concerned with development and therefore with questions of continuity and discontinuity, the movement from seed to tree.

Here's another definition. *Don Carson says that "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."* So what does that mean? It means that Biblical Theology is particularly concerned with the diverse literary and historical contexts of the story, and so attempts to relate the meaning of the story in the terms of the story itself. So for example, Biblical Theology traces out the development of sacrifice and covenant, not because those are particularly relevant contemporary terms, but because these are the terms and agenda which the story itself gives us.

Here's one more definition. *Steve Wellum says that "Biblical theology attempts to demonstrate that the Scripture does have a unified, coherent message and that the documents are not mutually contradictory."* What's the point of this definition? It means that Biblical Theology is interested not merely in the fact of prophetic promise and fulfillment, type and anti-type, but in the demonstration of these things, so that despite the diversity of literature, history, and human author, there is the reality of a single story, emanating from a single Divine mind, according to a single divine and sovereign will, and that is plain for all to see. As Don Carson rightly observes, this means that like Systematic Theology, Biblical Theology is not merely descriptive. Rather it is making "synthetic assertions about the nature, will, and plan of God in creation and redemption, including therefore also the nature, purpose and 'story' of humanity."

As you can see, none of these definitions are mutually exclusive, but each of them emphasizes a different aspect of what we call Biblical Theology. Perhaps the best way forward is to stick with the simplest definition I found. *Biblical Theology is the attempt to tell the whole story of the whole Bible as Christian Scripture.* It's a story, therefore, that is authoritative and gives directions and rule to our lives, because it's the story of the display of God's glory in salvation through judgment.

Questions?

Systematic Theology (23)

Systematic theology is the attempt to summarize what the whole Bible has to say about any given topic in an orderly and comprehensive manner. In other words, systematic theology isn't concerned with how a topic is developed over time across the history of the Bible. It's concerned to take all that's said on the topic, collect it, collate it, relate it, and then comprehensively summarize it. Systematic theology isn't concerned with the story-line, so much as it's concerned with the bottom line.

But of course, systematic theology does more than summarize the Bible's teaching on random topics. If we left the topics at random, we might call that disorganized theology. Traditionally, systematic theology has sought to organize the topics themselves, making sure that all the major and most of the minor topics of Scripture are covered, and then relate the topics to each other logically, so that an entire system of thought is established. In that sense, systematic theology is not an encyclopedia of the Bible, giving us articles on every topic imaginable. It's an attempt to make explicit what we might call the Bible's world view. When such a framework for understanding who God is, who we are, where we came from and where we're heading is in place, it quickly becomes apparent that systematic theology allows us to think biblically about all sorts of things that the Bible does not directly address—What does the Bible teach about psychology, about modern science, about the social welfare state? Well, nothing directly. But quite a bit indirectly, because the Bible, through systematic theology, gives us a worldview through which to think through those issues.

We can go even one step further. Not only does systematic theology summarize the Bible's teaching on any given topic, and then organize those topics into a coherent framework or worldview. *It also 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 declarative statements. So to use an example from Wayne Grudem: "The Bible says that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will be saved" is a perfectly true summary of the Bible's teaching on salvation. But if that's all we have to say on that topic, then everyone from the RCC, to the Mormons, to thoughtful Muslims can line up behind that statement. Why? Because we haven't said what faith is, who Jesus Christ is, what

salvation is, what we're being saved from and to, and what it means to believe in Jesus. To protect against error and to communicate the truth that actually saves, systematic theology goes beyond general summaries to precise and detailed doctrinal formulations. This isn't an effort to improve the Bible, but to be fully faithful to what the Bible teaches.

Finally, systematic theology not only summarizes, organizes and defines. *Systematic theology also seeks to apply these truths to our lives today.* Don Carson puts it this way: "Systematic theology worthy of the name...seeks to articulate what the Bible says in a way that is culturally telling, culturally prophetic." Its interests are not traditionalist. Rather systematic theology has a strong concern for contemporary relevance—its goal is to teach us not just timeless truth, but what it means to believe and obey that timeless truth today. Why do all of these theologians put application at the heart of systematic theology? For the simple reason that nowhere in Scripture do we find doctrine studied for its own sake. In that sense Systematic Theology is an attempt to obey the Great Commission. If Biblical Theology tries to understand how the Great Commission fits into God's overarching plan of redemption, Systematic Theology tries to spell out just what it means for us to teach and obey everything that Jesus has commanded.

RELATING THE TWO (23)

How then do systematic and biblical theology relate to each other? We can think about this in at least two different, but helpful ways.

First, there is inevitably a trajectory of authority. It begins in Scripture, the authoritative and normative source for all our theologizing. That trajectory then moves from Scripture through our exegesis of a particular passage toward biblical theology, as we put all the passages together and finally to systematic theology, as we try to summarize and apply to our own lives today. In that sense, Biblical theology tends to be more foundational, while systematic theology both builds on the results of Biblical theology, and is itself guided by the interpretive horizons established by biblical theology.

But second, there is also a trajectory of use (or end). While both have the Bible as their source, the organizing principle of biblical theology is historical, tracing out the development of revelation. On the other hand, the organizing principle of systematic theology is topical, and logical. Topical and logical in that it seeks to describe the Bible's teaching in its own terms. Biblical theology immerses us in the storyline of the Bible; Systematic Theology smoothens out the complexities of the Bible's worldview. We won't understand that world view if we don't understand the story out of which it arises. But if all we have is a story, how then are we to know what to think of the story that is our life?

Questions?

Test Case: The Gospel (24)

So let's consider for a moment how each of these disciplines are important, and relate to each other, when we try to answer the question: What's the gospel? What's the good news that the Bible reveals to us?

Biblical Theology:

The coming of the Kingdom of God:

Creation→Fall→Redemption→Consummation.

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

Systematic Theology: God→Man→Christ→Response. Here's how the cosmic good news becomes good news, gospel for me. The coming of the Kingdom of God (biblical theology gospel) is bad news for sinners. But in view of Christ's work on the cross, and God's provision that I can benefit from that work through repentance and faith, (systematic theology gospel), I now have good news. For there is a message that brings me into the kingdom.

But as soon as I've said kingdom, I've returned to the biblical theology gospel. You see, I need both, and they need each other. To be right with God for this life only doesn't amount to much, says Paul. The hope which the gospel brings us into is "a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." (1 Peter 1:3-5)

Conclusion (24)

So what do we make of all this? What I've tried to do this morning is help you clarify in your minds the differences between biblical theology and systematic theology. And having spent the last four lessons singing the praises of biblical theology, this lesson I've tried to show you why, as great and important as biblical theology is, it's not enough if we're going to have a biblical theology that is also a theology that is biblical, one that's related to all of life. We need systematic theology as well. Next week, we'll spend the class thinking about how we go about formulating that doctrine. Let's pray.