

10.

Professor of aero-space and nuclear engineering at the University of Oklahoma, one of the leading members of the Institute for Creation Research in N.America, who declared, "Evolution is a scientific fairy-tale just as the flat-earth theory was in the twelfth century ... Evolution requires a faith that is incomprehensible! Biblical Creation is the only sensible alternative" (p96).

### THE IMPORTANCE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Peter Misselbrook, MA, Bristol

Any theology of the Bible - thus any Biblical Theology - must begin with the question of what the Bible is. To state that the Bible is the inerrant word of God is quite right, and this is the presupposition of our study, but this only asserts something about the origin of the Bible and the extent of its trustworthiness, it does not answer the question of what this word from God is and what it has to do with us.

It is our contention that the Bible tells a story, a true story to be sure, but a story nevertheless; it is the story of redemption. Though the Bible tells one story, its unity does not consist in the sameness of all its parts - the book of Leviticus is very different from the Gospel of John. The unity of Scripture is to be found not in its unchanging doctrine but in the directed coherence of its story; each part is built upon what has gone before and each part points beyond itself towards what will come after, demanding the subsequent chapters for its completion.

Any Biblical Theology, if it is to be a Biblical theology, has to do justice to the nature of Scripture as the revelation of the redemptive

work of God. It must deal adequately both with the unity of the Bible story and the diversity of its parts.

Here, we ought perhaps to make one or two comments on the Biblical Theology of Geerhardus Vos. Vos considers that Biblical Theology differs from Systematic Theology in that its organising principle is historical rather than logical:

Whereas Systematic Theology takes the Bible as a completed whole and endeavours to exhibit its total teaching in an orderly, systematic form, Biblical Theology deals with the material from the historical standpoint, seeking to exhibit the organic growth or development of the truths of Special Revelation from the primitive pre-redemptive Special Revelation given in Eden to the close of the New Testament canon. (*Biblical Theology [1975 reprint], pp.v-vi*)

For Vos, Biblical Theology is the same as the history of Special Revelation. Biblical Theology is therefore

... the study of the actual self-disclosures of God in time and space which lie back of even the first committal to writing of any Biblical document, and which for a long time continued to run alongside of the inscripturation of the revealed material ...  
Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible. (*Ibid., p.5*)

It seems to us that Vos has not done justice to the nature of Scripture. Vos views the Scriptures not as the revelation of the redemptive work of God but as the record of God's progressive unveiling of truth regarding Himself and man's relationship with Him. In consequence, Vos does not really provide us with a theology of the Bible but, by his own confession, only a theology of

"the actual self-disclosures of God in time and space which lie back of even the first committal to writing of any Biblical document." The source material for the construction of his Biblical Theology is not the entire Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments but only the verbal or doctrinal self-revelations of God to which the Scriptures bear witness. Those parts of Scripture which record no self-disclosures of God of this sort, such as the purely narrative material, many of the Psalms, and the greater part of the Wisdom literature, are not considered by Vos to be important to a Biblical Theology (see the index of Scripture references at the back of Vos's book).

Against Vos, we would argue that a Biblical Theology must reflect the character of Scripture as the story of redemption. The source material for a Biblical Theology is not simply the doctrinal self-revelations of God within the Scriptural documents but is the entire Bible. We would suggest that the measure of a Biblical Theology is precisely its ability to handle the whole compass of the varied Biblical testimonies without it becoming a disunified bag of bits.

### An Outline of the Bible Story

The Bible story begins with an account of how God made the entire created order and placed man in the midst of the earth to rule over it to the glory of God. Here man had fellowship with God and enjoyed God's blessings. This was the condition for which he was created; it was life.

But in Genesis 3 we read of Adam's rebellion against God and his consequent loss of life - life in the earth and life before God. Man now lives - or more properly dies - in a world under God's curse.

From Genesis 4 to the end of the New Testament we have the story of the redeeming work of God. God's purpose is to restore the broken relationship

between man and Himself and consequently to lift creation's curse. His purpose is to restore the world (man and creation) to the state for which it was created (this does not, of course, imply that the last state is identical in every respect with the first).

In constructing a Biblical Theology - or even an Old Testament theology - it is vital that we grasp the breadth of the Biblical view of redemption. Just as man's sin affects not only his relationship with God but also all his creatorial relationships, so redemption is not merely a mending of man's relationship with God but involves a liberation of the creation from its bondage under God's curse, the institution of the Kingdom of Redemption. The Old Testament (and indeed the whole Bible), cannot rightly be understood until we grasp the creation wide scope of both sin and redemption.

Man's rebellion continues until the whole earth is overrun with wickedness and violence. God therefore determines to destroy both man and his world. But in the midst of a world under God's wrath, God saves one man from destruction, Noah, and with that man he saves his family and the animal creation. The old world is destroyed under judgment, but from this saved remnant there is to spring a new world; thus Genesis 9:1-7 repeats God's words to Adam in Genesis 1:28-30 (with certain significant differences). But this remnant of the old world cannot be the source of a new, there needs to be a more radical renewal or regeneration. The history of man's rebellion repeats itself in Noah's drunkenness, Ham's shamelessness, and finally the concerted rebellion of arrogant men at Babel. Once again God's judgment falls upon man.

The story of Noah supplies us with a clear picture of the nature of the redemptive work of God. (This we would argue against Vos who views the Noah covenant as a non-redemptive "nature covenant".)

Although the created world is to be destroyed under God's judgment, it does not accord with God's purpose simply to remove redeemed man from the place of destruction and take him up to heaven. God's purpose is still to give man life in the earth and before Him: He will establish His Kingdom. Thus the created order is redeemed along with man (just as it had been cursed along with man), and redeemed man is made the underlord of the new creation to rule over it to the glory of God.

The redemptive story of Genesis 4-11 ends in failure; not the failure of God's purposes but the failure of man. This new world is but the remnant of the old and goes the way of the old. Thus its history ends in judgment and scattering. The story of Noah thus points beyond itself to a greater and more perfect redemption.

The story of God's redeeming work continues with the story of Israel (beginning when Abraham is chosen from among the scattered nations under judgment). The story which begins with the Exodus from Egypt and which ends with Israel's peaceful possession of the land of Canaan is clearly the story of Israel's redemption. The redemption of the people of God consists in God bringing His people out of bondage to false gods and out of subjection to a Godless society and into a land where they are established as a redeemed society, free to serve Him. This redemption is completed only when God raises up His anointed king as a champion of His people. Under David the last enemies of the people of God are defeated and God's dwelling is established in the midst of His people at Jerusalem. Here God's kingdom is seen in the earth as God dwells with His people and they serve Him.

But this story also ends in failure, particularly the failure of the Israelite kings. The failure of Israel once more points us beyond Israel. As

the prophets bear witness, the story of Israel points beyond itself to the greater and final redemption which God will yet accomplish in the last days. God will establish His kingdom.

With the New Testament the Bible story reaches its conclusion. In Christ the work of redemption is completed and perfected: sin is defeated, God's Kingdom is established, creation is restored.

The Kingdom is made visible in the life of the Son of God. Under His hand creation is freed from curse and the relationship between it and man is miraculously restored: He feeds the multitudes when they lack food - they eat without labour and sweat; He heals their diseases and even raises the dead. His miracles are therefore an intrusion of the final kingdom of redemption, an anticipation of the day when sin and curse will be no more, when creation is regenerated and the body is raised from death.

But the redeeming work of God, by which man and creation are restored to their proper relationship before God, is effected primarily through Christ's death and resurrection, and it is to be seen in all its glory only at Christ's return. In His death, this world, a world lying under wrath and curse, is brought to judgment. His resurrection is the beginning or firstfruits not merely of the new humanity but of a new creation (Gal.6:14-15, and compare 1 Cor.15:20 with Rom.8:19-23). The new creation, and thus the life of God's people, is at present hidden with Christ in God, but it will be made manifest at the last day (Col.3:1-3). Then this world will be brought under final judgment and will be destroyed in fire, to be succeeded by the new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:10-13). The new earth is to be the inheritance of the people of God, here they will reign with Christ for ever (Matt-5:5, 2 Tim.2:12, Rev.5:10,11:15). God will dwell with His people in the earth and they will serve Him there (Rev.21-22, especially

16.

21:1-4, 22:3-5).

Jesus is the second Adam. The consequences of Adam's sin are undone through Christ's work (Rom.5:12ff). In His death He atones for the sins of men and satisfies God's justice by bearing their curse. In His resurrection He undoes the consequences of Adam's rebellion, overcoming death and becoming the firstfruits of the new creation which lives before the face of God (Rom.6:10).

Jesus is the Messiah. It is through His mighty act as champion of His people that the Kingdom of God is established. Christ gains the victory over every last enemy of the people of God. He rules over the nations until all are subject to Him. Through His agency all the kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdom of our God (1 Cor.15:25-28, Rev.11:15).

Christ fulfils the Scriptures, for in Him the story of redemption reaches its predestined conclusion.

The Christian and the Christian Church are also part of the Bible story. In Christ's death and resurrection the life of the new creation has already begun, and in the Church (the company of the redeemed), it is already visible in the midst of the world. The church consists of those who are "in Christ", who have died to the old world and who already live the life of the new creation (Rom.6, Gal.6:14-15, 2 Cor.5:17). The church is a foretaste of the kingdom, and the extension of the church is part of the coming of the kingdom. Here are a people who live before God in the earth and who, as far as it is possible in this age, live the life of the age to come. In their relationships one with another they manifest something of the new humanity, and in their relationships with, and service in the earth they manifest something of the new creation.

Christians must view themselves (both individually and corporately) within the redemptive historical

context of the Bible story. We live in the light of our past (not our private history and experience but the Bible story of our past from Adam to Christ) and we live towards our future (again, not some private destiny but the goal of the Bible story). This is certainly very evident of the focal point of Scriptural redemption - our relationship with the redemptive work of Christ. The Christian lives in the light of his past - his death with Christ and resurrection with Him to new life, and he lives towards his future - looking for the return of Christ and already living (albeit imperfectly) the life of the age to come. But this peculiar relationship between the Christian and the Bible story (that is his story) is true of every part. Every passage speaks to him as one *"on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come"* (1 Cor.10:11). We are children of Abraham (Rom.4:16-18) and Israel's story is our story, their promises our promises and their inheritance our inheritance (Eph.2:11-14). This must be the starting point in establishing the regulative or normative function of Scripture.

To summarise: the Bible is the revelation of the redemptive work of God. The Scriptures form a unity because they tell one story of God's redemption, a redemption which is centred in the work of Christ. All of the Old Testament thus points to Christ and cries out for His coming.

God's dealings with Noah and with Israel are anticipations of the final and perfect redemption, a redemption which was won for us by Christ's death and resurrection and which will be made manifest at His return. Noah's new world and the Israelite theocracy are "intrusions" or "types" of the final Kingdom.

The Church, though very different from Israel, is also an anticipation of the final Kingdom of God.

The task of Biblical Theology is to understand the Bible theologically by understanding each part or

18.

theme according to its place within the ongoing drama of the redemptive work of God.

### Why Bother with Biblical Theology?

In concluding this article I wish to suggest several reasons why we should give ourselves to the study of Biblical Theology.

1. Our belief in the inerrancy of Scripture counts for nothing unless we are students of the Scriptures, subject to the Word of God and being transformed by it. The first motive for the study of Biblical Theology is that it is no more nor less than the study of the Bible and its message.
2. Biblical Theology displays the unity of Scripture as the revelation of the unified redemptive work of God, a story which begins with the tale of a garden, ends with a city of gold, and which is centred in the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Biblical theology is therefore the best answer to liberal views of Scripture which fragment the Bible and destroy the unity of its redemptive message.
3. Biblical Theology respects the diversity which exists within the overall unity of Scripture. It is not embarrassed by the very real differences between Exodus and Ecclesiastes, the Book of Job and the Gospel of John. It recognises that each part of the Biblical literature has its own peculiar place within the redemptive revelation. Each book of the Bible is thus viewed within its own historical and redemptive context and is not treated as a piece of timeless doctrine. But, precisely because each part is viewed in its (Biblical) context it is not isolated from the rest of Scripture.
4. Biblical Theology enables us to view Bible themes from a Biblical perspective. Many Bible themes, such as those of the Sabbath, the promise of the land, the tithe, etc., have been misunder-

stood and misinterpreted by the Christian Church because they have been fitted into a system of timeless doctrine instead of being viewed according to their place within the developing redemptive work of God.

5. Biblical Theology presents us with a consistent, controlled, and above all Biblical method of interpreting the Scriptures. While displaying the unity of the Scriptures and the focus of all the Bible (Old and New Testaments) in Christ, it enables us to avoid the arbitrary spiritualising which so often passes for an evangelical understanding of the Old Testament. Biblical Theology is the only answer to the contemporary misuse of Scripture by both Evangelical and Liberal: it lets the Bible speak for itself.

6. Biblical Theology displays the full breadth of the purposes of God. It is a fine antidote to the emaciated gospel preaching of our age. Here we see that the purpose of God is nothing less than the recreation or regeneration of man in every aspect of his being and relationships: reconciliation with God and also the transformation of man's life in society and in the earth, the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

7. Finally, Biblical Theology displays the Bible as a message to be preached, and makes preaching of any part of the Bible a possibility and a joy. The Bible is not a book of abstract doctrine but the revelation of the redemptive work of God in which we are intimately and presently involved. The application of the Biblical message is therefore not left to the artifice, ingenuity and whim of the preacher, but springs directly from the relationship between the redemptive story and those who need to be, or who are being redeemed.

*(The writer has promised to submit a further article on 'THE SABBATH' for the next issue as an example of his approach to Biblical theology - Ed)*