9Marks

Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church

A Guide for Ministry

Michael Lawrence

Foreword by Thomas R. Schreiner

"Usually, you have to go to different sections of the bookstore to find good books on biblical theology, systematic theology, ministry, the church, and the Christian life. At the very least, the relationship between theory and practice seems strained. However, this book brings these concerns together. Michael Lawrence believes that good shepherds are theologians and good theologians are shepherds. For anyone who believes that theology needs the church and the church needs theology, this will be a welcome resource. For anyone playing with the idea, it will be a compelling one."

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

"I am grateful that this book has been written. It's an ambitious book—broad in scope and simultaneously rich in insight. Its biblical, systematic and pastoral theology are presented in a lucid and accessible way, its case studies are pastorally helpful, and its polemics are thought-provoking and penetrating.

Michael has done us a great favor by grounding his subject material in the cut and thrust of ordinary pastoral ministry while at the same time stimulating us intellectually. His unshakable commitment to propositional revelation, the centrality of the Bible in church ministry, and his unflinching belief that God works by his Word are a great foil to much theology in vogue in the church today.

This book is a bell ringing in the fog of American Christianity—with its extremes of prosperity, market-driven, and emergent theology—that we at the ends of the earth in South Africa have sadly not escaped. It calls us back to the old fashioned, tried and tested practices of exegesis, hermeneutics, and preaching that have fed the Christian church for centuries. May God use it to nourish his church, which often seems undernourished both in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere."

Grant J. Retief, Rector, Christ Church, Umhlanga, Durban, South Africa

"According to the apostle Paul, one of the central works of pastoral ministry is rightly dividing the Word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15), and it takes diligent study to be able to do it. According to Michael Lawrence, it is also vital to rightly apply the Word of truth to the life of a congregation, and to be certain that the application is faithful to the united story of the entire Scripture. In his book *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*, Lawrence skillfully guides his readers in constructing a biblical theology, "the whole story of the whole Bible," and teaches them how to derive lessons from that story. But Lawrence's heartbeat is the right application of the story and those lessons to the daily life scenarios every minister faces. This work is a succinct, readable manual on the right application of the storyline of the whole Bible to the common issues of daily life which pastors will inevitably face as they minister in the twenty-first century. It is a valuable addition to the library of any pastor who yearns to see God's Word bear fruit for eternity."

Andrew Davis, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Durham, North Carolina

"With biblical illiteracy in the church at an all-time high, faithless and banal preaching the seeming norm, and Christian leaders impressed more by stories of success in the marketplace than the biblical story of redemption, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* comes as a much needed correction. Michael Lawrence is surely right: One must understand the grand story of Scripture to rightly interpret its constituent parts. When the story is misunderstood or ignored, then Christian preaching and ministry will inevitably suffer. Through definition, explanation, and example, Lawrence has produced a thorough and practical guide to correct biblical interpretation, Spirit-empowered exposition, and faithful ministry."

Todd L. Miles, Assistant Professor of Theology, Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon

"Every thoughtful preacher or teacher of the Bible sooner or later faces questions of the nature of biblical theology, its relationship to doctrine (systematic theology), and the practical application of both to the ministry that edifies the church. Following in the footsteps of Geerhardus Vos and Edmund Clowney, Michael Lawrence has provided us with a masterly study that relates biblical theology to systematics, and then applies both to the ministry of the church. This skillfully executed integrative approach breaks new ground in the practical application of biblical theology. Its thoroughness without being over-technical makes it accessible to anyone who wants to be a better preacher or teacher of the Bible."

Graeme Goldsworthy, Visiting Lecturer in Hermeneutics, Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia.

"Studies on the relationship of theology to ministry seem to be quite rare. In fact, some books designed as 'guides for ministry' often portray suspicion of and hostility toward the theological enterprise. On the other hand, some theologians think that such guides are not worthy of serious attention. What is desperately needed is a work that recognizes the significance of the work of theology for ministry, while simultaneously recognizing the importance of doing theology for the church. Michael Lawrence has brilliantly met this need in this clearly written and compelling volume, which envisions afresh the work of pastor-theologians. I believe that *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* will certainly be one of the most important books for pastors and theologians to read this year."

David S. Dockery, President, Union University

"Biblical theology is the missing tool for so many pastors—and yet is such an essential tool for rightly handling the Word of God. Michael Lawrence leads us step by step from theological foundations all the way through to real life applications of biblical theology. In other words, he shows us how to read and use the Bible rightly on its own terms. He skillfully blends scholarly insight with down-to-earth pastoral awareness and covers a huge amount of ground in the process. This is a great example of theological thinking for the work of ministry. You may not agree with every conclusion he draws but you cannot fail to benefit from interacting with his thinking."

Graham Beynon, Minister, Avenue Community Church, Leicester, UK

"I am deeply thankful for this important book and pray it will be widely read and greatly influential! There is no greater need in the church than biblically grounded theological discernment that informs everyday life. The perspective and methods of "doing theology" that Michael Lawrence provides are crucial for developing this distinctively Christian view of life. Ministry methods and foci today are so often determined by pragmatism, consumerism, trends, and the latest opinion polls rather the an holistic understanding of the Bible. *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* points the way out of this man-centered approach and helps equip leaders for God-honoring, gospel-advancing ministry. Lawrence writes with the depth of a careful theologian and the heart and experience of a loving pastor. Here he models what he is wanting to produce with this book—pastor-theologians who understand the whole counsel of God's Word, and are able to translate it into the lives of God's people for the glory of God."

Erik Thoennes, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology, Biola University; Pastor, Grace Evangelical Free Church, La Mirada, California

Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church

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Biblical Theology
IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH
A Guide for Ministry

Michael Lawrence

FOREWORD BY
Thomas R. Schreiner

CROSSWAY
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In memory of
Meredith Kline
(1922–2007)

And dedicated to
Scott Hafemann, Gordon Hugenberger,
Rick Lints, and David Wells
my professors,
who taught me not only to love theology,
but to love the church as well.

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Foreword

I don't know anything about how to fix cars. A couple of times when I was younger and financially pressed, I tried to fix my car on my own. I solicited some advice and went to work. Not surprisingly the results were disastrous. Something unanticipated always went wrong, and I would get stuck. The problem was my limited knowledge of cars. I lacked the broader perspective necessary to fix them.

Too often as pastors we may encounter the same problem I did in attempting to repair my car. We desire to help people with their problems, but we lack the broader framework we need to truly assist them. Our ministry could end up doing more harm than good if we fail to understand the Scriptures. Our fundamental calling as pastors is to shepherd those under our care, but how can we fulfill our calling if we lack a map of the whole Bible, if we don't know how to put the Bible together? How can we give wise spiritual advice if we are ignorant of the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27)?

In 1 Corinthians 1–4 we discover that the Corinthian church was divided over Paul, Apollos, Peter, and even Christ. Apparently, they measured the effectiveness of Paul and Apollos by their speaking abilities. Some exalted Apollos over Paul because they believed he was rhetorically more effective. Perhaps they argued that the Holy Spirit was working more powerfully in Apollos. What would you say to the Corinthians if you were their pastor? I suspect many of us would simply say, "Stop being divisive. Show your love as Christians and become united in the gospel. How foolish it is to create divisions over which speaker is rhetorically more effective." When Paul confronts the problem, however, he probes deeper and reflects on the matter theologically. He argues that their divisions reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the cross of Christ. If they truly grasped the message of Christ crucified, they would not fall prey to such a secular worldview. By being entranced with the speaking ability of Paul and Apollos and by boasting in them, they were denying the fundamental truth of the cross, namely, that God saves sinners. Their boast in Paul and Apollos was a mask for their own pride. We could continue to reflect on Paul's response to the Corinthians. My point in bringing up this matter is simply this: how many

of us when confronted with such an issue would think theologically and see a failure to understand the cross?

All of us need instruction on how to think theologically. What a joy, therefore, to read this book by Michael Lawrence. Dr. Lawrence is a veteran pastor, and his pastoral wisdom shines through these pages. The best theology in the history of the church has always been written by pastors. We think of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Spurgeon, and Lloyd-Jones. Pastor Lawrence provides a wonderfully clear and helpful entrée into biblical theology, so that we see the importance of covenants and canon, prophecy and typology, continuity and discontinuity. Furthermore, we are treated to an illuminating sketch of biblical theology from creation to consummation, where some of the main arteries of the storyline of the Scriptures are explicated. This book is not long, but it is packed with wisdom, and it always has its eye on the usefulness of biblical theology for the church and for pastoral ministry. The last two chapters on biblical theology and preaching and teaching, and biblical theology and the local church are alone worth the price of the book. I was instructed and encouraged in reading this book. I am reminded of the words Augustine heard when he was in the garden before his conversion, "Take up and read!"

Thomas R. Schreiner
James Buchanan Harrison Professor of
New Testament Interpretation,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary;
Preaching Pastor,
Clifton Baptist Church

Preface

This is a book for people who are passionate about ministry in the local church. It's not a book for theologians and academics (though I hope both will read it and like it). It's a book for pastors and church leaders who can't even remember the last time they had a discussion using words like "compatibilism" or "theodicy" but who every week must help someone understand why we even bother to pray if God already knows everything, or why God hasn't allowed them to conceive a child or find a job. In other words, it's a book for people like me.

It's for people like a fellow elder of mine who was recently having lunch at a burger joint with a friend. This man had lost his job in the latest economic downturn and his car had broken down just a few days before. And now he was looking at a savings account that was dwindling toward nothing.

However, he'd been listening to preachers on television. And they had promised that God would provide material blessings today, if only he would have faith today. The friend quipped, "You know, like in Deuteronomy, where God says that he will bless us in our homes and in our fields if we only follow him."

How should my fellow elder have responded? Does Deuteronomy promise Christians that God will bless us in the city, bless us in the country, bless us when we are coming in, and bless us when we are going out? If you have a Bible nearby, look at the first few verses of Deuteronomy chapter 28. You'll see that it certainly promises such blessings to the Israelites. And the talk of blessings there doesn't mean warm spiritual fuzzies. The blessings God promises mean full barns and fruitful wombs, the praise of nations and the respect of enemies. It means their best life today!

Yet are those promises true for Christians? Can the unemployed Christian expect that God will quickly provide a job if only the Christian can muster up enough faith? What about the barren couple who longs for children? Should we say to them, "You just need to *believe*, and God will give you the child you long for"? Or do the blessings God promised Israel merely foreshadow the gospel-believing Christians' promised inheritance in eternity?

The answer to these questions directly affects how my fellow elder

should have ministered to his unemployed friend. It affects how you and I should minister to people around us.

I'm not going to tell you what my fellow elder said to his friend (we'll come back to this story at the end of the book). Yet, this story illustrates the premise of this book: our theology determines the shape and character of our ministry. Theology is how we move from the text of Scripture to how we should live our lives today.

The Critical Importance of Biblical Theology

This is a book about theology. But it's really a book about ministry, because I'm convinced that if we want our ministry to have a lasting impact and our churches to be healthy we must first do our theology well. In this book we are going to talk about how to do theology that will in turn help us do something practical, namely, pastoral ministry. Not only that, I hope to talk about doing theology in a practical way, so that you will know how to *do* it yourself!

You may have noticed that this book belongs to the 9Marks series. 9Marks is a ministry dedicated to equipping local churches and pastors, and it takes its name from Mark Dever's book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. The second mark of a healthy church, Dever says, is biblical theology.[1] But what Dever means by "biblical theology" is theology that's biblical, or theology that's *sound*.

The word "sound," Dever points out, means reliable, accurate, and faithful.[2] And it's the word "sound" that Paul uses over and over with his disciples Timothy and Titus to describe their doctrine and their teaching. Sound doctrine opposes ungodliness and sin (1 Tim. 1:10–11). Sound instruction opposes false doctrine (1 Tim. 6:3). Sound teaching is the pattern Timothy has seen in Paul (2 Tim. 1:13). Sound doctrine will be rejected by the churches who would rather hear what their itching ears want to hear (2 Tim. 4:3). And, again, sound doctrine will encourage those who hold firmly to the trustworthy message and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:9). Over and over, Paul tells these two men to "teach what is in accord with sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1). Sound doctrine, or theology that is *biblical*, is a big part of what I want to talk about in this book. Chapters 4 and 5 are largely devoted to the topic, and the remainder of the book tries to work it out in practice.

But sound theology is not all I want to talk about. I also want to talk

[1]Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, new exp. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), ch. 2.
[2]Mark Dever, *What is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 70.

about biblical theology in a narrower sense. In this sense, biblical theology is about reading the Bible, not as if it's sixty-six separate books, but a single book with a single plot—God's glory displayed through Jesus Christ. Biblical theology is therefore about discovering the unity of the Bible in the midst of its diversity. It's about understanding what we might call the Bible's metanarrative. In this sense, biblical theology as a discipline has been around for a couple of centuries in one form or another. Lately, it's become especially popular among evangelicals. I'll describe how we do this in chapters 2 and 3, and then define it more carefully in chapter 4.

But here at the start, I want to make the point that the most practical thing we can do, the most important tool we need in ministry, is biblical theology. And I mean that in both senses of the phrase. Learning how to *do* biblical theology is no mere academic exercise. No, it's vital to your work as a pastor or church leader. It shapes your preaching, your counseling, your evangelizing, your ability to engage wisely with culture, and more. You will not be a very good theologian, which means you will not be a very good pastor, if you do not learn how to do biblical theology.

Reading the Bible means learning how to use the tools of biblical theology, in the narrow sense of the word. Applying the Bible means learning how to use the tools of systematic theology. Strangely, the two disciplines of biblical theology and systematic theology are often pitted against one another. But the church and the pastor need both. And so here we will consider how to do biblical theology, so that we might be better systematic theologians, so that we might become better pastors.

What all this means is that you are holding in your hands a "how-to" book. Learning how to *do* biblical theology will help you learn how to pastor well. Or, if you're not a pastor, it will help you learn how to better teach, disciple, and counsel other Christians. And that's the work of every Christian. Through the course of this book we will think together about how to read and apply the Bible for ministry in the church. This book will follow that basic outline—from biblical theology, to systematic theology, to pastoral ministry. In my mind, that progression translates into really useful theology.

I realize that saying theology is useful, even necessary, for ministry is a bold assertion. I make it for two reasons.

Ministry Is Theology in Action

First, if you are a pastor or are involved in ministry, you should be a theologian. This doesn't mean you need to write books of theology (though reading them can be helpful). This doesn't even mean you need to know

the inside and outside of every theological controversy on the radar screen (though you should know how to detect a false teacher when you see one).

Rather, your role as a theologian means:

- You have taught the church about God's goodness and sovereignty, so that when a child is diagnosed with cancer, the parents will be grief-stricken but not completely undone.
- You have equipped the eighteen-year-olds heading off to college with the necessary tools for facing the radical relativism of their professors.
- You know how to help the man in your church who is struggling with whether or not God knows the future because his brother-in-law from another church gave him a bad book.
- You have helped a young wife and mother who struggles with perfectionism and people-pleasing to find her justification and worth in the gospel.
- You have prepared the engaged couple for the challenges of marriage through premarital counseling that focuses on God's plan for our holiness and not just instantaneous happiness.

Now, I said that every pastor *should* be a theologian. It would probably be more accurate to say that every pastor *is* a theologian, whether he is conscious of that fact or not. We'll talk more about this in chapter 5, but every pastor (and every human, really) relies upon some set of theological assumptions when addressing situations like these. The question is, are your assumptions sound? Are they biblical?

Biblical theology, then, is the discipline that helps us to be better theologians and, therefore, better ministers. It's how you get from texts like Deuteronomy 28 to the theology of the gospel. It's how you travel from the words of this ancient text all the way to how to encourage an unemployed Christian friend.

A Word-Centered Model of Ministry

The second reason theology is useful, even necessary for ministry is this: God's Word has real power to change lives. Therefore, as people in ministry, we have a vested interest in knowing how to understand and apply the Word correctly.

God has spoken through his written Word. In his Word, he has revealed who he is, who we are, and how he calls humanity generally and his people specifically to live. Non-Christians are saved and Christians grow in grace through the preaching, teaching, counseling, and speaking of God's Word, applied by God's Spirit. Our goal as pastors and Christians in ministry is to

present this Word to others, so that the Word might do its work. We hold it up and say, "Here it is. This is what God says. Please, hear and heed." We're called to read it, yes, and we're called to "give the sense" of it for our hearers (Neh. 8:8, ESV).

Not everyone agrees with this emphasis on the Word of God. I recently had the opportunity to contribute to a "five-views" book on worship in which different writers contributed one of five perspectives on corporate worship in the church. Then each of us had the opportunity to respond to the other writers in order to point out places of agreement and disagreement. In the chapter I co-wrote with Mark Dever, we emphasized the centrality of the Word of God in the church's weekly gatherings. Everything that we say, sing, pray, and practice in our church gatherings, Mark and I argued, should come from the Bible.

In response to our chapter, one of the other authors felt that we overemphasized the role of God's Word. In fact, he said that he does not believe "the classic 'preaching the Word' is the only (or even primary) way that people come to faith and are built up in their faith." Growth does not primarily occur through the ears, he said, but through the eyes—"watching others live out their faith in daily action is the primary vehicle of transformation." The idea that people are transformed through hearing the Word spoken or preached, he says, turns preaching the Word into something "magical."[3]

Now, I trust that this brother values God's Word and uses it in his ministry, and I certainly affirm the importance of the church's faithful witness for backing up the church's words. Yet I fear that he has missed what the Bible says about itself. God tells us that his word will "accomplish" his desire and "achieve" his purpose (Isa. 55:11). His Word both "calls things that are not as though they were" (Rom. 4:17), and then it "sustains all things" (Heb. 1:3). Michael Horton has summarized this very well: God's Word does not merely impart information; it actually creates life. It's not only descriptive; it's effective, too. God speaking *is* God acting.[4]

Evangelicals have defended the propositional nature of God's Word against modernists and liberals who would undermine its truthfulness. But what about the pragmatism in our own evangelical backyard that would undermine its sufficiency? To this emphasis on Word *as proposition* we must add Word *as powerful and effectual*, because God's Word is carried along by God's Spirit in order to perform exactly what he intends for it. All

[3]Dan Wilt, "Responses to Michael Lawrence and Mark Dever," in *Perspectives on Christian Worship: 5 Views,* J. Matthew Pinson, ed. (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 278.
[4]Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology (*Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 40.

creation "was formed at God's command" (Heb. 11:3; Ps. 33:6), and we become new creations by that same command (Rom. 10:17; 2 Cor. 4:6). We have been "born again . . . through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23). That's why, speaking to the churches, the apostles refer to the Word "planted in you, which can save you" (James 1:21); the Word that "abides in you" (1 John 2:14); and the Word which should "dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16).[5]

In short, the model of ministry I'm relying upon in this book begins with a Trinitarian understanding of God's Word. In creation and new creation, we see the Father speaking through the Son by the power of the Spirit. In ministry, then, our primary task is to point to the Son with the Son's Word, trusting the Spirit to either harden or soften as he pleases (Mark 4:1–20). The local church, therefore, is the place where God's Word "dwells" or, more literally, makes a house (Col. 3:16). So we plant and water the Word, plant and water the Word, always trusting God to make it grow when and how he pleases (1 Cor. 3:6).

What does all of this have to do with biblical theology? Biblical theology is how we go about the task of reading the Word and ensuring that it's God's Word rather than our words that are shaping people's lives. Biblical theology is how we bring people into the life-changing story of God's redemptive plan.

The Plan for This Book

The Introduction gets the ball rolling by asking what the biblical text is. The Bible is a different sort of text than any other, and we'll consider how and why.

Chapter 1 presents some of the basic tools of exegesis, tools that may already be familiar to you.

Chapters 2 and 3 introduce you to the basic tools of biblical theology. The large question to be answered here is how we put the Bible together.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to comparing biblical theology and systematic theology, as well as a discussion of what systematic theology is and how to think theologically.

Then in chapters 6 to 10, I will trace out five different biblical-theological themes in order to consider what they teach us for systematic theology of pastoral relevance.

Chapters 11 and 12 are the most practical of all. Chapter 11 will

[5]Ibid., 39–40.

present several preaching "case studies." I'll start with a text and then look at how one might preach it in light of everything we've learned about biblical and systematic theology. Then in chapter 12, I'll conclude by considering the relevance of biblical theology for other areas of ministry, including counseling, missions, and more.

How should you go about reading this book? Some of you are going to find the early chapters daunting. We're going to deal with some technical issues of theological method. If that sounds like more than you bargained for, I'd encourage you to treat this book like the instruction manuals you get with a new computer. There's the thick manual that tells you everything you'd ever want to know, and then some. And then there's the single page Quick Start guide for those that just want to turn the computer on and get going.

If what you're looking for is the Quick Start guide, turn straight to chapter 6 and start reading there. That's where the computer gets turned on and everything comes to life because that's where you see me actually do the things the first five chapters are talking about. Later, when you're ready to figure out how to do it yourself, go back and look at the earlier chapters.

One thing this book will *not* do is tell the storyline of the whole Bible in the way that most basic biblical theology texts do. Nor will it give a full-blown systematic theology. For that reason, this book would be well accompanied by two others: one that lays out the storyline itself, and another that covers systematics. For a systematic theology, you can't do much better than Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.[6] For the Bible's storyline, let me recommend three. Graeme Goldsworthy's *Gospel and Kingdom* (which can now be found in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy*[7]) is a great introductory text that tells the story of the Bible as the story of God's people, in God's place, under God's rule. A slightly simpler version of this book, which admits its debt to Goldsworthy from the very beginning, is Vaughn Robert's excellent *God's Big Picture*.[8] Finally, if you're up for a book that's just a little more academic, I trust you will benefit immensely from Stephen Dempster's *Dominion and Dynasty.*[9] It's well worth the extra time you will spend getting through it.

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[6]Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).
[7]Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 2000).
[8]Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Story-line of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).
[9]Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

Acknowledgments

This book would never have been written had my friend and colleague, Mark Dever, not had the vision to develop a whole community of writers to address each of the nine "marks" of a healthy church. I am grateful to him for his encouragement to take the mark of biblical theology, make it my own, and then do something useful with it for the church.

The first step was a series of sermons preached at Capitol Hill Baptist Church during the summer of 2006. The encouragement and feedback I received from the congregation, especially the service review guys, convinced me of the usefulness of the material, and served to make it better. Special thanks go to John Ingold and Lisa Law for transcribing those sermons.

Twice, in the fall of 2007 and again in 2008, I was able to work through some of this material on the mission field. I'm grateful to the leadership of the IMB's Central Asia region for giving me the opportunity and privilege to work with their people. While this book has been written with a North American audience in mind, it was that experience that convinced me of how practical, and how cross-cultural, biblical theology really is.

Those sermons, trotted out all over the world, now form section 2 of this book, though in greatly modified form.

But if it weren't for Jonathan Leeman, those useful sermons would still be languishing in my files. It's because of Jonathan that this *particular* book has been written. His vision and partnership, first in helping me expand my vision from those initial sermons to the book you are holding, and then in creating a class at CHBC that would give me the chance to write the manuscript, and finally in editing the completed product, have been invaluable.

Steve Wellum also read the manuscript and provided insightful critiques that saved me from more than one blunder.

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With all this help, this book is markedly better than it would have been. Despite all this help, the flaws that remain are wholly my own. My hope is that God will use it, flaws and all, to encourage the work of his church and to promote the glory of his gospel.

Michael Lawrence
Capitol Hill Baptist Church
Washington, DC

INTRODUCTION

The Text to Be Examined

As church leaders, you and I are faced with problems and questions every day that require us to turn to the Bible for answers, guidance, and wisdom. Along with prayer, the Bible is the most important and the most fundamental tool we've been given for the work of pastoral ministry. If you've been doing ministry for any length of time, you've probably grown quite familiar with this tool. You know your way around all sixty-six books. You have favorite passages you turn to again and again—the twenty-third Psalm for hospital visits, Romans 8 for the discouraged and hard-pressed Christian, John 3 for evangelistic conversations, Nehemiah for lessons on leadership, Isaiah 6 for the young person considering a call to ministry. You wouldn't dream of walking into a church meeting or a hospital room without a Bible in hand.

But for all your familiarity with the Bible, when was the last time you thought about what this powerful tool is that you're holding in your hand? Sure, it's a collection of sixty-six inspired books. And yes, it records for us the history of ancient Israel, the ministry of Jesus Christ, and the founding of the Christian church. But, taken as a whole rather than in individual parts, how do you answer the question, "What is the Bible?"

The Importance of Definitions

The answer I'm really concerned with isn't the one you learned in seminary or Sunday school, but your working answer. I'm asking how you use the Bible day in and day out in your ministry because that will show you and me what you really think the Bible is.[1]

[1]In putting it this way, I am not meaning to imply that function determines meaning or authority. Postliberals (for one example, see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984]) have argued that the Bible *is* Scripture because it *functions* that way in the church. But in contrast to that view, the point of this book is that precisely because the Bible *is* the inspired and inerrant record of God's redemptive activity in history, revealing his purposes and his character, it should *function* for us as both normative and sufficient Scripture. Functionality for ministry therefore arises from and is constrained by ontology, not the other way around.

For example, when I pick up a hammer, I don't think of it in the technical terms of its material construction or component parts. I think of it as something that will help me drive a nail into a wall, and use it accordingly. On the other hand, I have chopsticks scattered all over my house, but I don't always think of them as eating utensils. It turns out they are just the right size to release the locks on bedroom and bathroom doors when one of my younger children has accidently locked himself or herself in. Functionally, those chopsticks have become keys, regardless of their proper definition.

It's no different with the Bible. Regardless of the correct definition, your working definition will determine how you use it. Sometimes that means you'll use it as intended, the way I use a hammer. But sometimes that means you'll misuse it, the way I misuse chopsticks. And while no real harm comes from my misuse of chopsticks, we all know that real harm can result from the misuse—the misapplication—of a tool as powerful as the Bible.

Two Possible Answers

So what is the Bible? My own church's statement of faith provides one possible answer, one that I think many of us tend to use. In our very first article of faith, we affirm that the Bible is "a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction," that "it reveals principles by which God will judge us," and therefore is "the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried."[2] I think every single one of those statements is true, but notice their emphasis. The Bible is a collection of instructions, principles, and standards. To put it in more colloquial terms, the Bible is an "answer book" for life's problems or a compendium of principles by which to live and die. But is this definition adequate for ministry?

Let's take that definition of the Bible and apply it to a question the elders of my church recently faced. A family was considering making a large capital purchase. Yet to provide the required down payment, they would have had to alter their tithe to the church for a short period. They hoped to make it up to the church later, but there was no guarantee they could. They came to us for advice.

If the Bible is fundamentally an answer book, then we'll expect to find a verse or passage that gives this family the counsel they need. But which passage do we turn to? Malachi 3:10—"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse"—seems to provide an answer, but then what do we do with

[2]*The New Hampshire Confession*, Article I, "Of the Scriptures" (rev., 1853), adopted by Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC, at its incorporation on February 28, 1878. For the full text of the confession see William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 361–367.

2 Corinthians 9:7? "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Consider also the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Does the story mean we should have warned this family, or is it just a story about what happened to two people in Jerusalem in a unique time of the church's life with no normative implications for our lives? As you can see, the "answer book" approach to the Bible raises a host of questions before we even get to the answer we're looking for.

Another possible answer to the question, "What is the Bible?" is that it's a story, a narrative of God's interaction with the world he made. Though there are lots of people in this story, it's fundamentally about what God has done and will do to bring this world to judgment and his people to salvation. According to this working definition, the Bible reveals the plan of salvation and how God has accomplished that plan, first through Israel and finally through Jesus Christ. Is this definition more useful for ministry than the previous one?

Let's apply it to the question we just considered. If the Bible is merely, or mostly, the story of God's saving actions in history, then beyond trusting in Christ for their salvation, rather than in worldly riches, it doesn't have much to say to their question. We might refer them to Luke 16 and the story of Lazarus and the rich man, or to Hebrews 11 and the character of faith which looks forward to "a better country—a heavenly one." But at the end of the day, unless we revert to the answer book approach or to pragmatic wisdom, this definition of the Bible leaves us with very little to say to the family which wants to know if they can delay their tithe in order to purchase property. As you can see, the story of salvation approach to the Bible may be faithful to the main point, but it also seems to contradict 2 Peter 1:3, where we are promised that we have been given "everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

A Better Definition

So what should we do? What we need is a better understanding of what the Bible is, one that doesn't reduce it to life's little answer book, but keeps the focus on God, where it belongs. But we also need an understanding that doesn't reduce it to the story of how we get saved and go to heaven, leaving the rest of life up for grabs. We need a working definition of the Bible that allows for systematic answers to almost any question that comes up, but that also provides those answers in the context of the biblical storyline itself. We don't want to rip verses out of their context, and so misapply

them, but neither do we want a story that never touches down into the nitty-gritty of our lives.

Biblical theology helps us establish that better understanding of what the Bible is. When we talk about biblical theology, we mean a theology that not only tries to systematically understand what the Bible teaches, but to do so in the context of the Bible's own progressively revealed and progressively developing storyline. Faithful biblical theology attempts to demonstrate what systematic theology assumes: that the Scriptures are not an eclectic, chaotic, and seemingly contradictory collection of religious writings, but rather a single story, a unified narrative that conveys a coherent and consistent message. Thus biblical theology is concerned not just with the moral of the story, but the telling of the story, and how the very nature of its telling, its unfolding, shapes our understanding of its point.

Now, this doesn't mean that biblical theology is prior to systematic theology, or that it's more important or more faithful to the Bible than systematic theology. In fact, as we're going to see, biblical theology assumes and depends upon a number of things demonstrated by systematic theology: things like the infallibility and inerrancy of revelation as it comes to us in Scripture, the objectivity of the knowledge of God through revelation, and the trustworthiness of inspiration.

Everything that follows is intended to help you construct a faithful and sound biblical theology. Once you have that, you'll have a functional definition of the Bible that allows you to speak powerfully from God's Word into the lives of people like the couple we just considered. In the next few chapters, we'll look at the tools of biblical and systematic theology and how they work together. Then we're going to spend five chapters actually doing biblical theology—telling the whole story of the whole Bible and demonstrating how that story touches down into the details of our lives. Then we'll wrap up with two chapters that explore the use of biblical theology in the life of the church, from preaching, to counseling and discipling, to missions, to our understanding of the relationship between the church and our culture.

The Character of Divine Revelation[3]

That said, there are several features of God's revelation of his truth in the Bible that I want to discuss here. These features determine how we go about studying the Bible and constructing a biblical theology. There are four main characteristics of God's self-revelation as it is recorded in the Bible that we

[3]This section draws heavily from Geerhardus Vos's *Biblical Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975).

need to understand if we're going to understand the Bible and its teaching correctly, as opposed to misinterpreting and misapplying the text.[4] You'll notice that in this section, I'm speaking of revelation as "divine activity" in history, rather than as the inscripturated record of those divine actions, what we call the Bible.[5] God's self-revealing actions precede his self-explanatory words. This book is all about how to understand and apply those words to life. But to do that we first want to understand the character of how God has acted in history to reveal himself.

First, God's revelation is progressive. Islam understands that the Koran was revealed to Mohammed all at once, miraculously lowered down from heaven. The sacred texts of Buddhism and Confucianism are confined to the lifetime of a single man. But the Bible was not written in a moment, or even in a single lifetime. The Bible was written over two millennia, as God progressively revealed more and more of himself and his story. That's because the Bible, as we've already said, isn't the revelation of a set of principles, but the revelation of Redemption. And God's redemption, his salvation of his people, occurs both in history and over the course of history. Thousands of years separate God's act of creation from his future act of new creation. In between, humanity falls into sin and God acts to save sinners and then to explain those saving acts. We can point to the exodus and conquest of Canaan; the exile and then return of Israel; and ultimately the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible is both the record of God's saving acts and the explanation of them and therefore of necessity has a progressive historical character.

Second, God's revelation is not only progressive, it is fundamentally historical in character. So, for example, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are objective events in history that not only reveal something about God and redemption, but actually accomplish redemption. The Bible therefore is not merely a story told by humans about God's salvation of them; it is a story enacted and then explained by God about God. There is a God-centered focus in all of this as God objectively and concretely invades human history and acts to redeem his people to his own glory. Thus, in biblical theology we speak of redemptive history.

Third, there is an organic nature to this progressive revelation of God and his redemptive plan. It doesn't simply proceed like a construction site, which moves progressively from blueprint to finished building. Rather it unfolds and develops from seed-form to full-grown tree. In seed form,

[4]Ibid., 5–9.
[5]Ibid., 5.

the minimum and beginning of saving revelation is given. By the end, that simple truth has revealed itself as complex and rich, multilayered and profoundly beautiful. It's this character of revelation that's going to help us understand the typological character of Scripture, the dynamic of promise and fulfillment, and the presence of both continuity and discontinuity across redemptive history.

Fourth, God's revelation in history, and therefore biblical theology, is practical. God's intent in revelation is not to stimulate us intellectually, but to lead us into a saving relationship with God. So don't think that biblical theology is just for history and literature buffs. Far from it. If revelation is the story of God's saving acts, a story that begins at the beginning and ends at the end, then it's a story that contains our lives and our age, and therefore is extremely practical.

The Character of the Bible

If this is the character of revelation that is going to shape our approach to biblical theology, what specifically does this mean for the Bible? Just what kind of text are we looking at? I want to highlight five things about the Bible that we're going to come back to again and again. These characteristics of Scripture are going to determine how we study it. They're also going to shape what we expect the outcome of our study to be.

1) Historical/Human

First, the Bible was written by humans who lived in particular times of history. Second Peter 1:19–21 says,

> And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Most of the time people turn to this verse to demonstrate the divine character of Scripture—and we'll do that in a minute. But, quite significantly, it also clearly speaks to the historical and human character of the Bible. It refers to prophets as men who spoke, and by implication wrote, the Bible. When men speak, they use human language. That language both creates and reflects the culture they live in. So Isaiah spoke and wrote in ancient Hebrew, and used images like "soaring on wings like eagles," not "soaring

on wings like jet planes"! What's more, as we've already mentioned, the various human authors of Scripture lived in a variety of cultures over the course of dozens of centuries. They didn't all speak the same language, live in the same place under the same government, or structure their families the same way.

Practically, what this means is that the Bible is an intensely human book. And to understand it, we have to understand the languages and cultures and contexts of the various authors. We can't assume that what we mean by a word or poetic image is what they would have meant. We're going to have to engage in grammatical, literary, and even cultural study if we're going to avoid reading into the Bible our own ideas and culture. We want to do exegesis, not eisegesis. We want to read out of the text, not into the text, and so in the first chapter we're going to look more closely at the exegetical tools of biblical theology.

Don't start worrying that you need several degrees in theology to really understand your Bible. The human and historical character of the Bible doesn't merely imply distance from us as people who live in a different time and place. It also implies continuity with us, because this was written by people, not angels. Sure, they may have spoken different languages and eaten different food. But underneath the real cultural differences, they, like us, are people made in the image of God, with the same fears and hopes and problems and capacities that we have. Across the gulf of time, we can relate to the human authors as people, and they to us. What's more, what God did for them can also apply to us.

2) Divine

Not only is the Bible a human book, it is also a divine book. As 2 Peter 1:19–21 points out, behind the various human authors and prophets stood God, who through his Holy Spirit inspired the prophets to say exactly what he wanted them to say. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16, "all Scripture is God-breathed."

This is the doctrine of inspiration, a doctrine that doesn't mean God blanked out the minds and personalities of the human authors and used them like a keyboard. Rather it is the Scripture's own description of itself, as the product of the Holy Spirit working sovereignly through the human author. This has several implications. To begin with, it means that what the Bible says, God says. So the Scriptures are not simply people's religious musings of what God might be like. Rather, it is God's self-revelation.

Second, it means that the Bible is infallible (trustworthy) and iner-