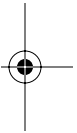




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THE LEECH HAS TWO DAUGHTERS

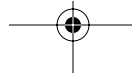
Who of us does not find at least some parts of the Bible difficult to understand? It is easy to ignore the problems by keeping to the well-worn paths of familiar passages. But when we begin to take seriously the fact that the whole Bible is the Word of God, we find ourselves on a collision path with the difficulties. It is at this point that we need biblical theology to show us how to read and understand the Bible. What does a particular problematic passage mean? How can I tell a Bible story so that it speaks to us as the Word of God? How does the Old Testament apply to you and me? What does it mean to interpret the Bible? These are some of the questions that biblical theology will help us to answer.

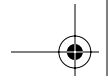


THE BATTLE OF THE BIBLE-BELIEVERS

There's nothing like feeling that if something is enough of a problem to you, you become motivated to read about it. If the doctor tells you that you will probably die of a heart attack if you don't do something about your eating habits and lifestyle, the chances are that you will start reading up on heart disease, exercise and diet. You can probably also see the wisdom in getting the right information before committing yourself to buying a new car or going on a world trip. And when you've bought a piece of expensive equipment, such as a camera, a microwave oven or a video recorder, you usually feel the need to read the instructions carefully. You read the instructions so that you don't do some real damage, and so that you can get the best results out of your investment.

Every so often as we read the Bible we find things which are a problem to us. It might be something that appears to be very inconsistent with key truths found elsewhere in the Bible. Or it might be that a passage just doesn't make any sense to us at all. Some may just shrug this off and go back to familiar parts of the Bible that seem to present no problems. But the Christian who is serious about finding out what the Word of God says





will not be content to take this easy way out. I hope that you are among those who would rather expend a bit of effort in order to gain a better understanding of the Bible as a whole. At this stage you may well ask, "What is biblical theology?" and "Why do I need it?"

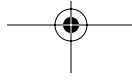
As Christians we want to know that our faith and our commitment to Christ are soundly based. We want to know the truth about eternity and about the here-and-now. What should we believe, and why? How should we live, and why? What are the means of knowing the answers to these questions? Most Christians would accept the Bible as the primary source of our knowledge of the truth. How is it, then, that there are such differing views, even opposing views, about some matters of importance to us?

Some of the differences arise out of different perceptions of the authority of the Bible. If the Bible can be interpreted correctly only by an authoritative church, then it becomes subjected to a body of church tradition and teaching. If the Bible actually contains an admixture of truth and error, then some basis for discerning what is true within the Bible becomes a higher authority than the Bible itself. When Christians agree that the Bible is the highest authority, then the differences tend to emerge at the level of questioning what the text of the Bible actually says and how it should be interpreted.

A Seventh-day Adventist who likes a good discussion approaches a young Anglican curate at a railway station and says, "Excuse me, what day is the Sabbath?" Without hesitation the Anglican replies, "Saturday," which surprises the Adventist because he expects the answer to be "Sunday." So he nods and moves on. Both speak from an acceptance of the Bible as the final authority. The question as to why they differ about what day Christians ought to go to church doesn't come up. Were it discussed, it no doubt would illustrate the problem of how to interpret the Bible.

A forum is organized on the subject of speaking in tongues. A Church of Christ minister finds himself aligned with an Anglican against two Pentecostal ministers. There is no question regarding the supreme authority of the Bible, yet on the subject of the working of the Holy Spirit, very great differences of understanding are expressed. Each sees his position as consistent with the overall teaching of the Bible as the Word of God.

So it goes. Christians with the same or very similar convictions about the Bible disagree over what the Bible teaches on the subject of baptism, predestination or the second coming of Christ. "Bible-believing" Chris-





tians are very serious about this. Truth matters, and you have to defend what you believe to be true. Deciding to be biblical, and believing and acting upon what the Bible teaches, does not solve all our problems. We are never finished with questions of what the Bible says, how it says it and what it should mean to us. I am not suggesting that the differences in denominational beliefs are all going to be solved by biblical theology. But I am suggesting that any Christian who wants to understand the reasons for the differences, and who wants to develop a sound method of approaching the text of the Bible in order to find out what it really says and means, needs an understanding of biblical theology.

■ *The meaning of the Bible*

is not settled purely on the basis of our understanding of its inspiration and authority.

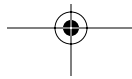
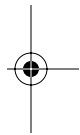
PROBLEMATIC PASSAGES

If I say, "The whole Bible is God's Word to me," how can I know what God is saying to me in any given passage? In what way is the word of a prophet to an ancient Israelite a word to me? How does the narrative of a bygone event touch my personal existence? And that is only the beginning of our difficulties. In the Bible there are many difficult passages, and many whose meaning seems to lack sense and consistency with what we believe the Bible teaches elsewhere. Some are quite plain as to their actual meaning, but they make no sense as God's word to modern people. Let's look at a few typical problems.

Remember the Adventist and the Anglican? If the discussion had proceeded, the following text would probably have come into question:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. (Ex 20:8)

On the surface the meaning of the Sabbath seems plain enough. There would be no dispute over what the Sabbath day was for Israel, and the Bible gives a fair amount of information about what keeping it holy meant in ancient Israel. The dispute is over what that means for us today. A similar message from the same part of the Bible would present a different kind of problem for our two disputing Christians:





Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk. (Ex 23:19)

Then there are those passages that use figures of speech, or images that are hard to grasp until we become very familiar with their background:

Dan is a lion's cub, springing out of Bashan. (Deut 33:22)

Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon looking towards Damascus. (Song 7:4)

Some passages are difficult because they are capable of a range of meanings and lack any clear context that might help us:

The leech has two daughters. "Give! Give!" they cry. (Prov 30:15)

Finally, we might mention passages that seem to present moral problems, or just seem hard to believe:

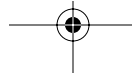
O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks. (Ps 137:8-9)

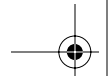
The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. (Josh 10:13)

But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let the Israelites go. (Ex 10:20)

He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded. (Josh 10:40)

These texts illustrate the fact that there seems to be many kinds of problematic passages in the Bible. Sometimes the problem is what the text actually means, and sometimes the problem is discerning personal application. The nature of the Bible is such that the way through these problems is to look at how the Bible holds together as one book with one message. Biblical theology is, in effect, the study of the unity of the message of the Bible.





■ Biblical theology

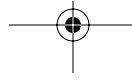
gives us the means of dealing with problematic passages in the Bible by relating them to the one message of the Bible.

HOW DO I TELL A BIBLE STORY?

Bible stories can be told with great effect, whether to small children, a family-orientated congregation or a chapel full of theological professors. The art of story telling involves skills in creating drama with words, no matter what the source of the story is or its relationship to the truth. Even children telling ghost stories around a camp fire, or after lights out at a slumber party, instinctively realize the value of realism, suspense and surprise in their story telling. Bible stories can be told with attention to those elements that will breathe the life of drama and human interest into them, or they can be robbed of all liveliness and appeal.

Christians, however, do not usually tell Bible stories simply to entertain. We see them as vehicles of truth about God and ourselves. Sometimes we see this, not because the truth for us is obvious, but because the particular story is part of the unfolding drama that leads to its climax in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Such stories are mainly in the Old Testament. What, then, if I tell an Old Testament story with all the story-telling skills that I can muster? Is that all? Does the story then interpret itself, and does it then move people to act according to the truth? Mostly we would want to make some kind of application to the hearer so that what happened in ancient times is perceived to be the word of God at this moment. It is not enough to say that because it is in the Bible we know that it is the word of God to us. When Joshua had taken Jericho, do we see the meaning of this for us as self-evident? Since we do not find ourselves in the situation of attacking cities, we may discern a very general and rather bland lesson about trust and obedience to God's commands. Are Bible stories, then, mostly illustrations of faith or unbelief?

Sooner or later the relevance of the Bible story to the reader or hearer must be considered if we are to think about it as part of God's word to us. Biblical theology is a means of looking at one particular event in relation to the total picture. This total picture includes us where we are now, between the ascension of Jesus and his return at the end of the age. Biblical theology enables us to see ourselves in relation to the far-off events in the





Bible narratives. To uncover our relationship to a particular event is to uncover its meaning for us.

■ *Biblical theology*

enables us to relate any Bible story to the whole message of the Bible, and therefore to ourselves.

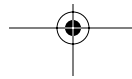
WHAT CAN I MAKE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT?

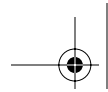
The Old Testament is more than just a lot of stories, although narrative history is the framework into which everything else fits. There are numerous problems that Christians meet when reading the Old Testament, but I shall mention only a few. First of all, the Old Testament is pre-Christian and never mentions the distinctives of the Christian faith. The people of Israel are not Christians and cannot be said to live “Christian” lives.

Second, the Old Testament contains a lot of directives that we as Christians do not observe. This is underlined by the fact that many Christians distinguish between a ritual law of Israel that no longer applies, and a moral law that is seen to be still in effect. A problem arises with a commandment such as the one requiring Sabbath observance, which some discard as ritual, while others hold to it as moral law.

Third, the prophetic view of the final saving work of God makes no specific reference to Jesus Christ, and is directed instead toward the national destiny of Israel. The kingdom of God centers on the restored temple in a rebuilt Jerusalem, to which are gathered all the previously scattered Israelites. Furthermore, the prophets do not really deal with the question of life after death or with the problem of the faithful who have already died by the time the kingdom of God arrives.

Fourth, if the Old Testament is somehow a preparation for the New Testament, as most Christians accept, why is the religion of the one so different from that of the other? The fact that the reading of the Old Testament in churches seems to be a dying practice only indicates that people perceive a problem with it. It is easy to say that the forms of the Old Testament religion are shadows of the New Testament religion, and that they are fulfilled by it. That, as a proposition on its own, could be said to argue for the discarding of the Old Testament once and for all. Yet there is something in the New Testament itself, as well as in the ancient traditions of the church,





which prevents us from doing this. The Old Testament goes on being accepted as valid Christian Scripture and, as such, it demands interpretation.

Biblical theology examines the development of the biblical story from the Old Testament to the New, and seeks to uncover the interrelationships between the two parts. Prophecy, law, narrative, wisdom saying or apocalyptic vision are all related to the coming of Jesus Christ in some discernible way. Biblical theology is a methodical approach to showing these relationships so that the Old Testament can be understood as Christian Scripture.

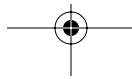
■ ***Biblical theology***

shows the relationship of all parts of the Old Testament to the person and work of Jesus Christ and, therefore, to the Christian.

THE BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

When you are close to the ground it is often very hard to see exactly where you are in relation to other places. A few trees, a dip in the ground, a couple of buildings or some other natural or man-made feature can prevent us from getting our bearings. That is why people build observation platforms on high buildings or on mountains, and why aerial photography became so important in war or in the peace-time making of maps. The bird's-eye view enables us to see things and places in relation to other things and places. A map is a representation of a bird's-eye view of a particular part of the earth's surface. It reduces an area that is too big for us to see at a glance to a model that is small enough for us to see all at once.

Some maps don't show spatial relationships because these are unimportant. Rather they show how different parts function in relation to other parts, or what their relative sizes are. Diagrams of electrical circuits or of a chain of command in the management of a business are maps of a kind, as are charts and graphs showing such things as a nation's imports and exports. Then there are descriptive word maps that do not rely on graphics and diagrams, but rather give verbal accounts. Biblical theology is a verbal map of the overall message of the Bible. In this book we shall also use some diagram maps to help us understand the way in which all parts of the Bible fit together into a coherent whole. Biblical theology assumes some kind of unity to the Bible, and that there is, indeed, one overall message rather than a number of unrelated themes.





■ Biblical theology

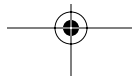
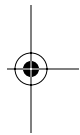
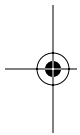
enables us to map out the unity of the Bible by looking at its message as a whole.

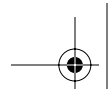
A QUESTION OF INTERPRETATION

The interpretation of the Bible is not always a simple matter. Some will not be convinced of this if their attitude is “I’m just a simple Bible-believer.” However, we must recognize that written words are only signs or symbols that have meaning assigned to them by common usage. They represent sounds that we produce from our mouths to convey meaning to people. A word may have a number of different meanings in different situations or contexts. Similarly, a group of words may have different meanings depending on whether they are meant to be taken literally, metaphorically or symbolically.

The words in the Bible are no different in that they always need interpreting within their own context. Interpretation as a study in itself is referred to as *hermeneutics*, which is a word derived from the Greek word meaning “to interpret.” Most commentaries on the Bible text concentrate on the meaning that the original writer or speaker intended. But we must go beyond this to the question of what the text means for us now. Once we understand what the biblical author was actually saying we look for its present meaning for us. This is what interpretation is about.

Biblical theology is essential for hermeneutics. The sound interpretation of the Bible presupposes some kind of biblical-theological understanding. Biblical theology makes the difference between the Bible as the Word of God to us now and as merely an interesting historical record. The ancient Babylonian king Hammurabi is famous for his code of laws. These laws need interpreting just as any words do if we are to understand their meaning. We may even ask how these laws have influenced modern concepts of law, if at all, and therefore have affected us. But when we look at God’s laws given to Israel through Moses, we see them as part of the total revelation of God, which climaxed in the coming of Jesus Christ. As Christians we are therefore more deeply concerned to ask in what ways the laws of Moses have meaning for us now. Biblical theology provides us with the means of moving toward an answer for this question.





■ ***Biblical theology***

provides the basis for the interpretation of any part of the Bible as God's word to us.

STUDY GUIDE TO CHAPTER 1

1. Write down some of the problems you have in reading and understanding the Bible.
2. Keep a record of difficult passages you meet in your Bible reading.
3. What lessons do you think can be drawn from the stories of Moses in the rushes (Ex 2), and David and Goliath (1 Sam 17)? Test yourself on other well-known stories.
4. Why is a "bird's-eye view" important for understanding any subject?

