PREFACE

Between the study and the pulpit there seems to be a great gulf fixed. Preaching professors and scholarly preachers are exotic specimens in America, often betraying by their speech a British or Continental origin. Preachers-turned-professors labor under a double suspicion, but they do have at least a taste of two worlds. From such an experience this book has grown. A decade in the pastorate brought on me a dawning conviction that the biblical-theological approach of the seminary classroom was excitingly rich for the pulpit ministry. The renewed opportunities for study offered by seminary teaching have provided an excursion into an Aladdin's cave of treasures. (Or rather, in the imagery of biblical theology, a treasure city of Solomon, suggesting the inexhaustible riches of God's grace, hid in Christ!) The half cannot be told, but in this day of good tidings the wealth of biblical theology ought not to be buried on the study desk.

Chapter One seeks to define biblical theology. It has a much more specific meaning than the association of two such familiar words would suggest.

Chapter Two raises the question of the authority of preaching. What is meant by calling preaching kerygmatic? What theology of the Word underlies preaching? Questions of ultimate importance for the pulpit ministry are at the core of contemporary discussion in biblical theology.

The perspective of preaching is discussed in Chapter Three. Our proclamation is at the end of the age and to the ends of the world. It requires joyful boldness as well as desperate urgency. The richness of the message is its focus on Jesus Christ. Biblical theology presents the Christ of the Scriptures, and the depth of religious experience which responds in faith to him.

Chapter Four relates biblical theology to the immediate
content of sermons, and ventures suggestions on tools and methods.

The substance of this book was delivered as three lectures in Grand Rapids, Michigan, June, 1956, to the Ministerial Institute of the Christian Reformed Church, a communion which has never divorced the pulpit from the study.

Particular thanks are due to my colleagues and students at Westminster Theological Seminary, whose interest and discernment in biblical theology are very imperfectly reflected in this book. I should like to thank particularly Miss Dorothy Newkirk for her skill and intelligence in typing the manuscript. All biblical quotations are taken from the American Standard Version except for a few instances where I am responsible for the translation.

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CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?

Every preacher who does not get his sermons from a book
wants to put them into one. This guarantees an unfailling
stream of sermonic literature, but it hardly accounts for the
flood level of current books on preaching. The unspectacular
work of the pulpit is exciting remarkable interest in a per-
verse age of jitters and yawns, when people may look, but
seldom listen.

The behavioral scientists appear to be attending the church
of their choice these days, and their analyses have further
stimulated a reviving discussion among the preachers them-
selves. A minister must master pastoral psychology for
“life-situation” preaching; if he cannot afford psycho-
analysis, he must at least adopt counseling techniques
to achieve empathy in the pulpit. Sociologists, too, have
discovered the minister, and are systematically charting his
conflicts as he insists on remaining a preacher in the midst
of a dozen other roles thrust on him. Group studies of the
congregation by these scientists may further inform and
dismay the man in the pulpit, and the new field of com-
munications spreads its network at his feet. From the
ecumenical movement he learns of the ecclesiastical setting
of preaching; bewildered though he may be by the latest book
on symbolism, he is convinced that preaching must be re-
lated to worship and the sacraments.

Underlying these new concerns are the old and fundamental
issues that have been forgotten rather than resolved. To
relate preaching to our time we must know what preaching is
and what it declares. By far the most important questions for
the contemporary ministry of the Word are theological. The
growth of what has been called a new “consensus” in theology
has been the direct or contributing cause of much of the
current revival of interest in preaching. In particular, the
renewed attention to biblical studies touches both the nature and content of preaching at its heart.

Nothing is so essential for the preacher as that he should grasp, and be grasped by, the truth. Gaining a deeper insight into the meaning and the structure of God's revealed Word equips the man of God anew for every good work. In all the wealth of fresh approaches to preaching there is none which has the significance or usefulness of that development in biblical studies which is generally called biblical theology.

What is meant by biblical theology? Despite the fact that it is a recognized division of the modern theological field, this question proves extraordinarily difficult to answer. One finds articles and monographs of considerable complexity devoted to just this problem.¹

At times the expression is used as a simple synonym for Christian theology, which, in its classical development at least, has always sought to give systematic formulation to the teaching of the Bible. The history of the term, however, gives it a more specialized meaning. At first it described the study of the biblical passages that support the divisions of dogmatic theology. German Pietists turned this phrase to polemic advantage by using it as a name for their own dogmatics. They contrasted their “biblical theology” with the speculative scholasticism of Lutheran orthodoxy. The term was then taken up by the rationalists of the Enlightenment, who identified biblical theology with the historical study of biblical religion. As Abraham Kuyper has pointed out, these rationalists did not believe the biblical theology they developed; rather they set it over against the confessional theology of the church so that they might be free to reject


For further survey material, in addition to the bibliography furnished by Baird, see page 122 of this study.
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both and go on to formulate their own rational theology.\(^2\)

Unfortunately the term “biblical theology” still bears the stamp of this usage. For example, Professor Dentan of Yale observes with respect to this period, “No biblical theology in the modern sense of the term was possible until scholarship generally had abandoned the old hermeneutic principles of analogy scripturae and analogy fidei, which assumed both the uniformity of religious ideas in the Scriptures and their identity with the doctrines of the orthodox churches.”\(^3\)

The rationalistic principles, however, as they were developed through the nineteenth century, particularly in conjunction with the Hegelian philosophy of history, led to what has been called the suicide of the discipline. Kaehler remarks, “In glancing over the development of Biblical theology, it is surprising to see how this branch has worked out its own disintegration.”\(^4\) The inherent relativism of the historical method dissolved the concepts “biblical” and “theological,” for the normative element essential to each was denied. The logical conclusion of this, made evident in the “history of religions” approach, was that the documents of the Old and New Testaments could not be distinguished from the literature of the ethnic religions, nor the religion of Israel from that of the surrounding nations.

Since World War I and Karl Barth’s Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, there has been a reaction to this extreme.\(^5\) We are frequently assured today that the normative element is essential for biblical theology. With this emphasis there has come a revival of interest in the study of biblical theology. But while many are agreed that the normative must be restored, the manner of its restoration has proved to be a problem. Most modern scholars are not willing to return to the analogy of Scripture, for they deny

5. This trend has been described in many of the articles cited on pages 122-124. See for example those written by J. D. Smart.
that the Bible presents a self-consistent standard. Some seek normative unity in a persistent and deep religious experience on the part of ancient Israel, shared by the Christian church. Others would find it in the redemptive actions of God, which have a continuity more or less faithfully reflected in the memorial records. In this last sense G. Ernest Wright declares, "Biblical theology, therefore, must be defined as the confessional recital of the acts of God in a particular history, together with the inferences drawn therefrom."6

The continuance of lively debate as to the "possibility" of a biblical theology7 reflects the inconclusiveness of these efforts to affirm the normative unity of biblical theology after denying the normative unity of the Bible. Scholars who think there are many different theologies in Scripture (or the raw materials for many)8 have surrendered the biblical basis for the unity of biblical theology. They may continue to seek theological unity by distilling it from the religious experiences of Israel, or perceiving it with the insight of the "mind of faith," but the result is not biblical theology in the proper sense of the term. Even the appeal to the redeeming and revealing actions of God as the foundational unity for biblical theology does not succeed in securing an objective source of unity in the Bible if it denies the unity of the Bible itself. One may believe that the many divergent responses in an all-too-human record were stimulated by a consistent pattern of divine action, but that belief remains empty unless this divine pattern is somehow perceived in the content of the recorded response. Apart from such content we cannot even affirm that we share with the Hebrew prophets the conviction that God acts. It may be that our god is their Baal.

As these critical scholars do grapple with the contents of

7. See especially the symposium by J. R. Branton et al. in Religion in Life cited on page 122.
the Bible, their own presuppositions become evident. Often it is apparent that they have replaced the analogy of Scripture with an analogy of the modern consciousness. Sometimes they assume that special revelation is continuing, so that our contemporary experience of “revelation” can correct the prophets; often they confuse inspiration and illumination, to the devaluation of Scripture and the inflation of modern insights.

Bultmann’s open demand that the message of the Bible must be demythologized is a consistent expression of the presuppositions of this whole approach. If there are no revealed truths, but only an encounter in the existential act of revelation, then the modern mind and not the Bible must supply the normative standard in understanding this encounter.

If we are to have a genuine biblical theology, however, we must accept biblical presuppositions and reject the anti-supernaturalism that is so often assumed to be inherent in the historical method. It is futile to give free scope to the negative criticism of such a method and then hope to build a biblical theology either with the remaining rubble or in the clouds of a noumenal dimension where faith has fled from science.

Biblical theology is a contradiction in terms unless the Bible presents a consistent message. Its essential presuppositions are the principles of revelation and inspiration claimed and assumed in the Bible itself. This is clearly seen and stoutly asserted by Geerhardus Vos in the introduction to his Biblical Theology. He lays down as his first principle “the recognition of the infallible character of revelation as essential to every legitimate theological use made of this term.” He rightly contends that this is of the essence of theism. “If God be personal and conscious, then the inference is inevitable that in every mode of self-disclosure He will make a faultless

9. This, in my judgment, is what R. M. Brown does in the symposium cited on page 122.
11. Ibid., p. 20.
expression of His nature and purpose. He will communicate His thought to the world with the stamp of divinity on it. If this were otherwise, then the reason would have to be sought in His being in some way tied up in the limitations and relativitys of the world, the medium of expression obstructing His intercourse with the world.”

It is now a common assumption that revelation cannot consist in the communication of revealed truths. This conviction is not itself derived from the Bible. According to the biblical record, God could and did communicate revealed truths through all the prophets and finally through His Son, who came with the words that the Father had given him (John 17:8).

Vos emphasizes that biblical theology must recognize the objectivity of revelation. “This means that real communications came from God to man _ab extra_. It is unfair to pass this off with a contemptuous reference to the ‘dictation’ view. There is nothing undignified in dictation, certainly not as between God and man. Besides, it is unsound, for the statements of the recipients of revelation show that such a process not seldom took place.” Vos goes on to make clear that he does not deny revelation from within. This is prominently present in the Psalms. However, Vos warns against the tendency to reduce all revelation in Scripture to this category in such a way as to deprive Scripture of its infallibility. “A favorite form is to confine revelation proper to the bare act of self-disclosure performed by God, and then to derive the entire thought-content of the Bible from human reflection upon these acts. Such a theory, as a rule, is made a cover for involving the whole teaching of the Bible in the relativity of purely human reflection, whose divine provenience cannot any longer be verified, because there is nothing objective left to verify it by.”

Recognizing the objectivity of revelation, Vos defines

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p. 21.
biblical theology as "that branch of exegetical theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible." Thus conceived, biblical theology is not self-contradictory. It does not undermine theology in the name of history. On the other hand it is not a reluctant concession on the part of orthodoxy to the demands of historical science.

It might be objected that if liberalism makes biblical theology impossible, orthodoxy makes it unnecessary. If propositions are given by revelation and a Book is the inspired Word of God, what does the church need beyond dogmatic theology as a compendium of biblical teaching and a system of proof texts to support it?

The form of the inscripturated Word itself gives answer to this question. The Bible records revelation given in the course of history. This revelation was not given at one time, nor in the form of a theological dictionary. It was given progressively, for the process of revelation accompanies the process of redemption. Since redemption does not proceed uniformly but in epochs determined by God’s acts, so revelation has an epochal structure, manifested and marked in the canonical Scriptures. Modern dispensationalism rightly recognizes that there are great divisions in the history of redemption; it errs in failing to grasp the organic relation of these successive eras, as developing manifestations of one gracious design.

Biblical theology formulates the character and content of the progress of revelation in these periods, observing the expanding horizons from age to age. So understood, biblical theology is both legitimate and necessary. It provides the full context for the exegesis of particular passages, which must be understood not only in the setting of a book, but also in the "horizon" of a period of revelation. In the reciprocity characteristic of sound hermeneutics, biblical theology is also the fruit of exegesis, an essential step in the formulation of

summary statements concerning the teaching of the Bible as a whole.

There is, then, no opposition between biblical theology and systematic or dogmatic theology, though the two are distinct. Systematic theology must draw from the results of biblical theology, and biblical theology must be aware of the broad perspectives of systematics. The two approaches differ in the development of material. The development of systematics is strictly thematic or topical. It seeks to summarize the total teaching of Scripture under certain "loci" — of God, man, salvation, the church, the "last things." The development of biblical theology is redemptive-historical. The divisions of biblical theology are the historical periods of redemption, marked by creation, the fall, the flood, the call of Abraham, the exodus, and the coming of Christ. Within these periods, or within further sub-divisions of them, a systematic method is used. This is not merely systematic theology on the installment plan, however. It would be arbitrary to classify the revelation of each period under the same fixed divisions which best serve systematic theology. Rather, there must be a sensitivity to the distinctiveness and emphasis of both the form and content of revelation in each particular epoch. The theophanic revelations of the patriarchal period and the memorial altars bearing commemorative divine names have their rationale in form and content. The framework of interpretation must reflect this. Quite another organization of material is needed in dealing with the institutions of the theocracy. Biblical theology must understand each in its own terms, and see the theological significance of the progress from Jacob's ladder to Moses' tabernacle.

No doubt there is room for flexibility of organization. A scholar may write an "Old Testament Theology" in which the organization is topical and systematic rather than historical, but which justifies its title by tracing the development of each of the doctrines through the history of revelation before Christ. Such a treatment would bring biblical theology close to the form of systematics. Yet it would be well to
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avoid the confusion of understanding biblical theology as either "a systematic statement of what the Bible contains," or as the history of religious thought among the Hebrews. The most fruitful understanding of biblical theology is that which recognizes both the historical and progressive character of revelation and the unity of the divine counsel which it declares. Its interest is not exclusively theological, because then the history of the revelatory process would be comparatively incidental. Neither is its interest exclusively historical. Those who propose that it be a history of Hebrew religion manifest a basic misunderstanding of revelation, or a disbelief in it. It is not precisely even a history of revelation, for its theological concern carries it beyond any merely historical study of the course of revelation.

Biblical theology as a distinct and fruitful study must take seriously both historical progression and theological unity in the Bible. The old "proof-text" approach has been much caricatured; its use by men who knew and loved the Scriptures never even approximated the calculated perversion practiced by some modern cults. The Westminster divines, for example, were too familiar with their Bibles and with the exegetical labors of John Calvin to ignore the context when they were required to furnish scriptural "proofs."

Yet it cannot be denied that this approach often lacked depth in its use of the Bible. The emphasis on history so

17. William A. Irwin finds it difficult to discover substantial differences between Old Testament theology and the history of the religion of Israel. He concludes that the chief distinction of the theological approach, in addition to a topical arrangement, is that it portrays Hebrew religious thought rather than practice and is concerned chiefly with the "higher" and therefore later manifestations of Hebrew religion. "The Reviving Theology of the Old Testament," Journal of Religion, XXV (1945), pp. 244ff.
characteristic of nineteenth-century thought has brought a fresh appreciation of history in understanding Scripture. The tragedy is that from the same sources has come an understanding of history that is completely unscriptural, sharing the presuppositions of positivistic science. The critical scholar is given every right to "his primary supposition . . . that every sentence of every page of every manuscript of every book of the Bible has had an understandable historical provenance." Since direct supernatural revelation — the voice of the Lord speaking from Sinai — is usually regarded as anything but an "understandable historical provenance," it is clear at what price "the Bible has been brought into organic relationship with the modern scientific conception of history."

A biblical theology which accepts historical progression in such terms has surrendered any hope of setting forth the theological unity of the Bible. There may be efforts to maintain such a unity by constructing a non-historical dimension for "the history of salvation" (Heilsgeschichte), but such dualism is no solution of the dilemma. Biblical theology as a discipline has been cultivated by liberals, but the field of Bible study to which it has led the way requires the orthodox conviction that the Bible is God's supernatural revelation and has the unity of his Word. Unless the Scriptures actually possess the unity which biblical theology must find to justify its existence, the whole enterprise is folly.

On the assumptions that the Bible itself makes, however, biblical theology is both proper and rewarding. The preacher who takes up Vos's Biblical Theology for the first time enters a rich new world, a world which lifts up his heart because he

20. Ibid.
21. W. A. Irwin is effective in objecting, particularly against Eissfeldt, to any attempt to select from the Bible only the elements congenial to a certain theological commitment and calling the result "biblical theology." Op. cit., pp. 239ff.
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is a preacher. Biblical theology, truly conceived, is a labor of worship. Beside Vos's Biblical Theology should be set his little book of sermons, Grace and Glory. There we hear a scholar preaching to theological students (the sermons were delivered in Princeton Seminary), but with a burning tenderness and awesome realism that springs from the grace and glory of God's revelation, the historical actualization of his eternal counsel of redemption.

An old Dutch preacher has sagely observed that the pulpit must not drive us to the text, but rather the text must drive us to the pulpit. In biblical theology that scriptural dynamic impels the preacher's heart with unimagined strength.

22. G. Vos, Grace and Glory (Grand Rapids, 1922).