

The *SBJT* Forum: Biblical Theology for the Church

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Stephen G. Dempster, A. B. Caneday, and Robert W. Yarbrough have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: How does a thorough knowledge of biblical theology strengthen preaching?

D. A. Carson: Before attempting to answer that question directly, it is important to gain agreement as to the commonalities and differences between biblical theology and systematic theology. For otherwise, the peculiar contributions of the former will not stand out.

Both biblical theology and systematic theology ask questions about what the Bible means. Typically, however, systematic theology asks questions in a more-or-less atemporal fashion, and generates answers that are cast the same way: What are the attributes of God? What is sin? What is the nature of the covenant of grace? What does election mean? Who are the people of God? And so forth. Of course, if the systematician provides the answers by *using* the Bible, and not simply out of the categories of well-worn historical theology, or even of philosophical theology, then he or she will inevitably introduce some temporal distinctions. For instance, to answer the question "Who are the people of God?" in *biblical* terms forces the systematic theologian to wrestle with the both the continuities

and the discontinuities between the old and new covenants. Any systematic theology of enduring value will not forget the sweep of the Bible's storyline: creation, fall, redemption, consummation. Nevertheless, one of the aims of traditional systematic theology is to summarize, in largely atemporal theological synthesis, what the Bible actually says on this or that subject, taking into account how these matters have been handled in the history of the church, and framing our theological synthesis so as to interact with and address the contemporary world.

By contrast, although biblical theology is no less interested than systematic theology in asking and answering questions about what the Bible means, in substantial ways it operates on different principles, and achieves different results. Above all, it operates with temporal categories never far from view. There are two consequences. *First:* typically biblical theology focuses on individual books and corpora. For instance, it may not ask, "What are the attributes of God?", but "How does the book of Isaiah present God? What does the Johannine corpus contribute to what the Bible says about God? What is the structure of the thought of Chronicles,

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compared with Samuel-Kings?” *Second*: biblical theology is equally interested in tracing the principle strands of thought *through* the biblical corpora. There are about twenty of these—such things as kingship, creation/new creation, temple, sacrifice, priesthood, rest, election, grace, faith, people of God—plus many minor strands. Such tracing of strands demands not only an awareness of *time* (for these strands or trajectories develop with time) but also a resolute sensitivity to *literary genre* (for these strands show up in very different ways in the different forms that make up the biblical books). The competent biblical theologian will want to be aware of the history of the discipline, of course, and speak to the contemporary world (as does the systematician), but on the whole biblical theology is not as resolute in its address of the contemporary world as is systematic theology.

This discussion could be teased out at length, but I shall restrict myself to two further qualifying statements before trying to answer the question set me. *First*, for the purpose of this discussion, I am concerned only with those forms of systematic theology and biblical theology for which Scripture is the “norming norm.” There are plenty of examples of systematic theology which use the Bible as a selective quarry to ground structures of thought not essentially Christian or biblical—structures the systematician may well use to weed out biblical notions and texts that he or she finds offensive, or at least out of step with the system. Similarly, there are many instances of “biblical theology” in which all the focus is on Old Testament theology or New Testament theology, but not on “whole Bible” biblical theology. Worse, even New Testament biblical theology (for instance) may be organized in

such a way that the reader is told that the different books and corpora of the New Testament represent competing, irreconcilable theologies. Inevitably, that means there is no attempt at synthesis; equally sadly, although it studies each book and corpus closely, it refuses to track out the trajectories that tie the Bible together. In other words, it squanders half the heritage of biblical theology, while refusing to confess that the Bible is the “norming norm.” *Second*, in the interests of full disclosure, I should acknowledge that the kind of biblical theology that interests me, the kind that preserves Scripture as the “norming norm,” is something in which I have invested a fair bit of energy in recent years: I am one of the consulting editors of *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (InterVarsity, 2000), and I edit the series *New Studies in Biblical Theology*.

So I turn to the question set me, and suggest five ways in which this kind of biblical theology may strengthen preaching.

(1) Biblical theology is more likely than systematic theology to pay close attention to the immediate biblical context. That should be obvious simply by comparing books: although some systematic theologies burst with biblical references, many, even by orthodox writers of great gift, display only the sketchiest effort to handle biblical texts (e.g., Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* [Westminster John Knox, 2005]). That option is simply impossible to the biblical theologian. Biblical theology is *necessarily* more tightly inductive as it reads biblical texts. Moreover, it is less likely to appeal to a distant biblical “context” (i.e., the “context” of one’s entire systematic theology, determined by other texts) to explain a

difficult passage, before carefully exploring what light the *immediate* context of the book and corpus might shed on the difficulty. Along these lines, then, biblical theology encourages the serious reading of the best commentaries. All of this is very important in the regular preparation of expository sermons.

(2) Biblical theology is more likely than systematic theology to explore the trajectories of Scripture, and thus teach people one of the most important lessons about how to “read” the Bible.

An illustration may help. Suppose you are preaching from Ezekiel. You have arrived at the great passage, Ezek 8-11, where Ezekiel is “transported” in Spirit to Jerusalem, seven hundred miles away. He witnesses the horrendous idolatry of the city, and he sees the glory of God abandon the temple, and ride the mobile throne chariot (the imagery is picked up from Ezek 1) outside the city to park on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city. At some point or other it might well be worth taking five minutes or so to remind the congregation where this description of what happens to the temple fits into the entire trajectory of the temple theme. You may not have to unpack all of that trajectory (on which see Greg Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* [InterVarsity, 2004]), but you might mention the care with which God designs the tabernacle in Exodus, the significance of the Holy of Holies and of the sacrificial system, the role of the priests and especially of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, and the significance of the tabernacle for the corporate worship of Israel under the old covenant as they assembled three times a year. The tabernacle was the great meeting-place between God and his people.

Whether or not you take the time to sketch in, say, the theft of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines, or the list of different locations where the tabernacle was pitched, or the frequent corruption of its attending priests (e.g., Eli’s sons), will depend on your larger purposes. But you will not fail to mention the Glory that descended on the tabernacle. Nor will you fail to mention how, under King David, royalty and priestly function come together in the city of Jerusalem, with the temple replacing the tabernacle under King Solomon—and once again, the Glory descending with such awesome splendor that the priests had to vacate the premises. The tragedy, of course, was that in the days of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, many people thought the temple was bit like a talisman: God could not possibly let pagans destroy the city of Jerusalem and its temple, they thought, and so they were “safe.” The temple functioned, in their imagination, far too much like a powerful good-luck charm. But God was showing Ezekiel, in his vision, that God himself was abandoning the city. When Nebuchadnezzar tore the place down four and a half years later, God wanted it to be known that Nebuchadnezzar’s success was not the result of his superior strength, but the result of God’s judgment. Meanwhile, in Ezek 11, God tells the exiles that he himself will be a “sanctuary” for them: in other words, the real “temple” is where God is, not where the stonework and masonry are.

When the exiles return, then of course they are encouraged to rebuild the temple, as they are still under the old covenant that requires it. Yet there is no record of the Glory descending on it again, as in days of old. But centuries later, the one who is the Word-made-flesh calmly says,

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2). Neither his opponents nor his own disciples understood what he meant at the time: John admits it. But after his resurrection, they remembered his utterance and understood the Scriptures: Jesus himself is the temple, the great meeting-place between God and human beings. There are derivative antitypes in the New Testament, of course: the church is the temple of God, even the Christian’s body is the temple of God. Yet the account drives on further: in the culminating vision of the last book of the Bible (Rev 21-22), the people of God gather in the “new Jerusalem”—and it is shaped like a cube. There is only one cube in the Old Testament, from which the imagery is drawn: it is the Holy of Holies. In other words, all of God’s people are forever in the Most Holy Place, always in the sheer unmediated Glory, forever with the Lord. Small wonder John testifies that he saw no temple in that city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

All of this can be sketched in five minutes. But to do this once in a while, when the temple theme comes up, is to fix in the minds of the congregation one of the twenty or so great trajectories that tie the Bible together. The believers are not only being edified by the prospect of the new Jerusalem, they are being helped to understand their Bibles, to read their Bibles more intelligently, to worship the wisdom of God in bringing these things to pass to make a cohesive whole and prepare his people for the Glory. When the preacher undertakes this discipline from time to time along *all* the major trajectories of the Bible, and many of the minor ones, believers are greatly edified by the Word of God, and unbelievers are helped to understand what the Bible is about, what

faith in Christ turns on.

(3) One of the great strengths of such preaching is that it avoids atomism. Sadly, a great deal of contemporary evangelical preaching is “biblical” in the sense that it picks up on some themes from the chosen passage and applies them to life within a grid that is largely personal, psychological, relational—but with almost no connection to God himself, and only accidental connection to the gospel. In other words, the themes in the sermon are “biblical” in the atomistic sense that they surface in this one text somewhere, but the passage itself is not adequately tied to the book, the corpus, the canon—and as a result, the deepest links of these themes are entirely missed. How this passage is tied to God and his gospel are lost to view. The sermon is “biblical” in only the most superficial ways. I wish there were space to catalog a long list of guilty examples. But I am sure of this: preachers who understand how the themes of biblical theology tie the Bible together are much less likely to fall into atomism than are preachers who are not so disciplined.

(4) The habit of thinking through the magnificent diversity of the biblical books—which of course is so much a part of responsible biblical theology—is likely to help the preacher devote time and care to the way the genres of Scripture should affect his preaching. How do I handle lament, oracle, proverb, apocalyptic, narrative, fable, parable, poetry, letter, enthronement psalm, theodicy, dramatic epic? Not to think about such things, of course, may still leave you orthodox: you may find principles and truths in all of these kinds of texts, incorporate them into your atemporal systematic theology, and preach them. Yet God certainly had good reasons for giving us a Bible that is shaped

the way it is: not a systematic theology handbook, but an extraordinarily diverse collection of documents, with one Mind behind the lot, traversing many centuries of writing, in many different forms. The fact that one Mind is behind all of the documents makes systematic theology both possible and desirable, but not at the expense of flattening out and domesticating the documents that still remain the “norming norm.” In other words, good biblical theology will not only help you handle more responsibly the trajectories that drive *through* Scripture, but it will also help you focus appropriately on the message, genre, focus, and thrust of *each* biblical document. It will help to keep your preaching fresh, and value affective elements as much as logic, and proverbs and laments as much as discourse.

(5) Ironically, for all of these reasons the preacher who genuinely understands the first four points is likely to become a better *systematic* theologian—and that, too, will enrich his preaching. One of the things that makes Calvin’s *Institutes* the rich repository that it is, is the fact that Calvin was himself as much a commentator as a systematician. If one uses the biblical books as a mere proof-texting quarry for systematic theology, one is likely not only to end up abusing the texts, but to produce an impoverished systematic theology. But if the preacher reads, re-reads, and teaches and preaches the biblical books, remembering the priorities of biblical theology, his grasp of Scripture—not to say the grasp of Scripture enjoyed by the congregation—will be richly enhanced. If Scripture remains the “norming norm” for that biblical theologian, then the move toward systematic theology will also be enriched. Tie that in as well to a growing grasp of historical theology, and to

a careful and critical understanding of the culture in which we preach, and we will have the rudiments of the training of a faithful minister who does not need to be ashamed as he rightly handles the Word of truth.

SBJT: Why has the discipline of biblical theology experienced a resurgence in recent years, and why is it so important for the church?

Stephen Dempster: Although biblical theology has been a neglected field of biblical studies for quite a while, it has experienced quite a resurgence in recent years. This has happened for a variety of reasons. The historical critical paradigm for the analysis of biblical texts, with its microscopic concern for background detail, sources, philology, and grammar frequently led to a fragmentation of the biblical text. It was as if the text was filtered through an interpretive sieve constructed for the discovery of bits and pieces of historical information. Theological matters were seen as unimportant or even irrelevant to this quest. The result was a loss of unity and coherence to the overall biblical message. Even to speak of an overarching biblical message seemed like a contradiction in terms. At best there were only “messages,” which were largely unrelated to one another.

Part of the problem with this approach is that the method determined the results. If you look at the painting of a beautiful landscape with a microscope, it is no wonder that you won’t be able to appreciate the beauty and the grandeur of the entire image. That only comes by putting aside the microscope and stepping back to see the complete picture. Similarly, reading a book by proof reading each word for possible error is a very different activity

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from reading a book for meaning. Different methods produce different results.

For a number of reasons, which now seem obvious, the historical critical paradigm has lost its dominance in the field of biblical studies and this has led to a renewal of interest in biblical theology. Biblical theology at its core assumes that while there is much diversity in the biblical message, nonetheless there is also a fundamental unity. This diversity and unity can be shown in the statement which begins the book of Hebrews: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe" (Heb 1:1-2 NIV). These verses capture succinctly both the diversity ("In the past . . . in many times and in various ways") and the unity of the Bible ("in these last days God has spoken to us by his Son") (See R. Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament* [Tools for Biblical Study 7; trans. D.Orton; Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2005], 752.). There is a goal to which the revelation of God points and this goal provides a unifying principle for the whole.

To switch the metaphor, biblical theology is concerned not to lose sight of the big picture of scripture. Losing sight of the big picture has serious implications for Christian believers. If you doubt it, consider for a moment ancient Israel. The prophets had to tell the people repeatedly that they had distorted the faith by magnifying the importance of sacrifices and minimizing the importance of ethics (Isa 1; Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:1-8). They had lost sight of the entire sweep of scripture: they were called out to be a light to each other

and to the nations (Gen 12:1-3; Exod 19:5-6; Isa 5:1-7). Losing this perspective led to their radical judgment.

It was the same in Jesus's day. Losing themselves in the forest of scripture, the biblical scholars of that time saw only the many individual trees, and thus they lost perspective and became *lost*. They majored on minors and minored on majors. They scrupulously tithed the smallest herbs of their gardens, while neglecting the "weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness" (Matt 23:23). Individual scriptures were important but somehow a sense of the whole was missing. Consequently Jesus excoriated them for such a distortion of the truth.

Similarly when Jesus was asked about divorce, he put the Mosaic legislation which permitted divorce, in the context of the entire sweep of Scripture and argued that the divine ideal in Gen 1-2 in which a man and woman were joined permanently as one psycho-physical unity was the governing paradigm against which the Mosaic legislation needed to be evaluated (Matt 19:1-12). Thus the latter was a concession to the evil of the human heart, an evil that had entered history as a result of the fall.

Paul also worked with the larger canvas of scripture when he showed the place of the law in the context of the divine plan of salvation. It came after the promise made to Abraham, in order to demonstrate the need for salvation by radically exposing human sin (Gal 3:15-29). The understanding of both Jesus and Paul was the result of a profoundly engaging meditation on the entire sweep of scripture, so much so that they were able to see its main goal and they were able to make their decisions based on this understanding. Jesus and

Paul were biblical theologians!

Plato once said that without knowledge of the Good, one cannot act with wisdom either in his own life or in matters of state (*The Republic* 7.517). The Good allows one to see everything in its proper place. Similarly without knowledge of the entire range of the biblical story, it is very difficult to be wise as a Christian. I am convinced that most in the Church do not have a sense of the Bible as a whole but rather see it as a manual for personal individual devotion which offers advice for private, spiritual development. This leaves the church open to the distortion of the truth, which is so widespread in contemporary Christianity.

Numerous issues clamor for the church's attention today and often responses are made by well meaning Christians with chapter and verse in hand. Is homosexuality a legitimate lifestyle? Is capital punishment still a biblical mandate? What about the ecological problem? "Illegal" immigration? Abortion? Women in ministry? The Sabbath? Economics? War? To cite a biblical chapter and verse as an answer to these questions will just not do. It is true that answers to these questions often fall in the domain of systematic theology. But there must first be an understanding of the whole to be able to provide a biblical response. This can only come from a reading and rereading of the biblical story—biblical theology—along with a radical dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Biblical theology will also help the church to deal with other issues, perhaps more insidious ones such as the encroachments of culture upon the biblical message in which the various story-lines of culture become more central than that of the Bible. When a church becomes so

enculturated that it is marginally different from the world around it; when baptismal fonts are transformed into waterslides; when marriage vows become trivialized through their repeated violation by church members; when a leading sociologist claims that western evangelicalism is "the quintessential adaptation to a society dominated by the marketplace and consumerism . . . [that believers] buy heavily into the therapeutic culture of feel-good-ism, and are caught up in a cycle of overspending and consumption like everyone else" (R. Wuthnow, "Review of Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*," *First Things* 51 [1995]: 41), a large part of the problem is that the biblical story has been supplanted by modern and postmodern ones. Why? This is because Christians just do not know their Bibles. They certainly know chapters and verses but these have been integrated into other pagan stories in the same way polytheists can make a place for Jesus in their pantheon. A recovery of the entire biblical story, which brooks no alternatives, can help provide an antidote to such cultural captivity.

Systematic theologies are often written in such a manner that the Bible seems like an abstract repository of information about God. A more static and abstract understanding of God may be the result. To read in a systematic theology about the love of God is one matter but to see that love acted out in the story-line of Scripture is another: the Creator getting his hands dirty with the creation of Adam, the grace extended to creation at the time of the flood, the call of Abram after the debacle of the Tower of Babel, the divine response to the groaning of Israel in Egypt, the incredible patience shown with Israel in the following centuries—even in

its judgment. This love is finally “fleshed out” in the coming of Jesus and his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. It is this story-line which provides the basis for description of the love of God, a love which will never give up on his creation. Even, ethics are based on the story and its significance. Paul urges the Philippians to have the mind of Christ, but this itself is embodied in the plot-line of scripture, in which the second Adam did not grasp for power, but humbled himself even to death on the cross, and is now highly exalted (Phil 2:1-11). What is this but a précis of the entire narrative of the Bible!

An understanding of the larger scope of Scripture also imparts significance to the individual events and their place within the story. For example, when Abraham argues with God over the judgment of Sodom in Gen 18, issues of justice and mercy are in the foreground. God finally says that he will not destroy Sodom if there are ten righteous people in the city. The subsequent destruction of Sodom establishes God’s righteousness and the moral order of the universe, but there lingers the truth that the city could have been spared if it had had ten righteous individuals. Later during the judgments of Samaria and Jerusalem, which became like Sodom, one cannot help but reflect on Gen 18. Prophetic intercession was also not able to save these cities. Did these places not even have ten inhabitants who kept God’s covenant? And why was not this the end? Why did Israel experience a resurrection from the exile of death? Because in God’s mercy there was the announcement that there was going to be *one* righteous covenant keeper whose intercession would save *many* sinners (Isa 53). The New Testament rachets up this truth when *one* man appears in a

Garden, agonizing in prayer for a world that had become like Sodom. What kind of person is this who now gives his one righteous life for a world of sinful people? Who could have believed such a thing would happen (Isa 53:1)? Everyone—anyone—who believes is now spared the justice of God. They can be made righteous because of *one* person! But it is not as if the fire and brimstone disappear. They come down upon the righteous Son of God whose death upholds both divine mercy and justice.

In conclusion, in some ways the final chapter of biblical theology has not been written. It is true that the story-line of Scripture has a conclusion depicted in the Apocalypse indicating that the outcome of God’s actions is not in doubt. At the same time this conclusion is open-ended and the church is mandated with writing the last chapter. N. T. Wright compares the church’s situation with that of a playwright who discovers a lost play of Shakespeare in which only four of five scenes have been recovered (N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 140. See *The Drama of Christian Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004]). To complete the play, a fifth chapter will have to be produced. But how can this be done? The playwright must immerse him/herself in the content of the first four acts in order to produce a completed work, faithful to the original. Similarly, there is a need for a final chapter of biblical theology: Creation (Act 1), Fall (Act 2), Conflict (Act 3), Climax (Act 4: Messiah’s Death and Resurrection) are finished. Scene five has started in the book of Acts but we now have the task of finishing this chapter while waiting for the consummation of all things. The

only way we can do this faithfully is to immerse ourselves in the story-line of scripture—and thus become part of the Story. Then we will write that final chapter with our lives, the very chapter of Christ Himself, written not with pen or word processor, but with the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:3).

As we write chapter five, we need to pray for the desire conveyed by George Herbert in his sonnet, “The Holy Scriptures,”

Oh that I knew how all thy lights
combine,
And seeing the configuration of
thy glorie!
Seeing not onely how each verse
doth shine.
But all the constellation of thy
storie

(G. Herbert, “The Holy Scriptures,”
cited in C. H. H. Scobie, *The Ways
of Our God: An Approach to Biblical
Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
2003], 80).

It is biblical theology that will help achieve this aspiration. The Bible will not be seen as merely a deposit of laws, stipulations, maxims, and historical information, but it will be the all-encompassing Narrative of our lives. Then we will be able to see the overall significance of the incredible events it describes as well as the part we have yet to play. The stupendous event of the incarnation, cross, and resurrection as the central turning point of history will lead to worship and praise. The immense privileges of the believer will astonish: the gift of the Spirit; the access to the Father; the ability to address the eternal Creator as “Abba”; the fact that the least person in the Kingdom is superior to the greatest individual in the Old Testament economy; the call to bring this incredible message to the ends of the earth! Thus in the end, biblical theology

can only lead to the goal of all true theology—doxology! In such a spirit we can faithfully write the final chapter.

SBJT: Can you discuss the significance of typology to biblical theology?

A. B. Caneday: Doing the work of biblical theology requires careful attention to *types* in the Bible. Excesses and abuses that regularly accompany teaching and preaching concerning types cause confusion. Fanciful interpretations of the Bible that dubiously identify types have prompted suspicion for many Christians to remain suspicious of discussions of biblical types. Some suppose that the Bible’s types are restricted to a few on the principle that unless the New Testament expressly identifies something from the Old Testament as a type it is not a type. Many textbooks on biblical interpretation tend to confirm suspicion about types. Some have little or no discussion concerning them. Other textbooks routinely show insufficient caution to distinguish biblical types from what they call “typological interpretation,” an interpretive method associated with “symbolic interpretation” and “allegorical interpretation.” Talk of “typological interpretation” is misguided and misleading because this elevates the reader’s role over the author’s role concerning types, symbols, and allegory.

To speak of “typological interpretation” is to confound interpretation and revelation. We rightly say that God’s revelation is *typological*, but to speak of “typological interpretation” is to admit to a form of “reader response hermeneutics.” Interpreters of the Bible do not cast biblical types. God, who reveals himself and his deeds in Scripture, casts the Bible’s types. God invested things with foreshadowing significance—institutions

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(e.g., the Levitical priesthood), places (e.g., Eden, the tabernacle), things (e.g., the ark, sacrifices, kingship), events (e.g., creation, the flood, the exodus, events in the wilderness, entry into the land), and individuals (e.g., Adam, Abraham, Melchizedek, Moses, David). God invested these with significance to prefigure corresponding features of the coming age.

Consider a couple of biblical types. God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who preceded Adam (1:17) also formed Adam (1:16) "in his own image, in the likeness of God" (Gen 1:7) as a prefiguration, a type (Rom 5:14), of the Coming One, Jesus Christ, who "is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). Likewise, the tabernacle in the wilderness functioned as a "copy" (*hypodeigma*) and "shadow" (*skia*) of "heavenly things" (Heb 8:5). The tabernacle and priestly service are types not because the New Testament writer interprets them typologically but because the Lord revealed these things to Moses as shadows of the heavenly sanctuary when he said, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain" (Heb 8:5). The tabernacle with its earthly and shadowy sacrifices repeated annually, was but a *shadow* of the *true* and *heavenly* sanctuary. As a *copy* of the *authentic* sanctuary, the tabernacle in the wilderness was not merely a *shadow* of the sanctuary in heaven. The tabernacle and priestly service was also a *prefiguration* of the good things to come with Christ (Heb 9:11; 10:1). Thus, after Jesus Christ, the true and great high priest, offered himself as the once for all time sacrifice at the end of the ages, he entered the authentic sanctuary to present himself before God on our behalf (Heb 9:23-26).

Given that our act of interpreting the

Bible entails recognizing biblical types cast by God, this presupposes that Scripture is the result of God's activity of revelation, albeit through human agents. The apostle Paul embraced this view of Scripture when he said, "For as many things as were written before were *written for our instruction*, in order that through the perseverance and through the consolation of scripture we should have this hope" (Rom 15:4). For Paul, then, God authorized holy men of old to write the Old Testament for us who believe in Jesus Christ.

To believers in Rome, Paul writes concerning Gen 15:6, "Now it was not written on account of him alone that 'it was reckoned to him,' but also *on account of us* to whom it will be reckoned" (Rom 4:23-24). Paul's use of "for us" requires that we recognize that he is not simply *applying* the text to us. Paul insists that the words "it was reckoned to him" were actually "written down for us." Two things stand out. First, Paul does not feature the *event* when God spoke the words "it was reckoned to him." Paul does not write, "it was *spoken* for us." Paul features Scripture as authoritative. The locus of divine revelatory authority is Scripture, what is *written*. Second, Paul announces, "it was written *for us*." That these words—"it was reckoned to him"—were "written down" signals that Scripture discloses that God intended that his reckoning Abraham's faith for righteousness should be understood as bearing significance far beyond Abraham himself. It "was written down *for us*." Even though he does not expressly identify Abraham as a type, Paul's statement and all of Rom 4 requires that we recognize that Abraham bears a prefiguring significance that finds fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

To the Corinthians Paul writes, "Now

these things happened to them typologically, and they were written down for our admonition, unto whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11). Paul distinguishes the *events* themselves from their being *written down*. Paul has no authority to assign typological importance to the events that Israel experienced. Instead, he recognizes that God brought about those events and stamped them with typological significance and that God authorized their incription “for our admonition.” God brought those events about in a *typological manner* (*typikos*). Earlier in the context Paul says, “Now these things took place as types for us lest we be cravers of evil as they also craved” (*typoi egenēthesan*; 1 Cor 10:6). Israel’s experiences under the cloud, passage through the sea, eating food the Lord provided in the wilderness, and drinking water from the rock *took place as types for us*. Twice Paul explains that when the events themselves occurred, they *took place typologically* because God impressed those events as types. God made sure that all these events, including Israel’s repeated acts of unfaithfulness (1 Cor 10:7-10), were *written down* “for us as admonitions” (Paul refers to Exod 32:6; Num 25:9; 21:5, 6; 14:2, 29-37). Paul’s expressions in Rom 4:25; 15:4; and 1 Cor 10:6-11 show that the Old Testament read correctly is God’s Scripture for the last days’ people of God. Paul expects Christians to read the Old Testament as he does, for if we are to embrace his gospel, we need to be able to trace his reasoning and his arguments that demonstrate that what God has done in Christ Jesus is the fulfillment of the types and foreshadows of the Old Testament.

As a reader of Scripture, Paul has no authority to confer typological import upon events recorded in the Old Testa-

ment Scriptures, despite being an apostle. Though his insight seems keener than ours, he only recognizes divinely authorized figural embedding in Scripture. He cannot forge types, for to try is to counterfeit Scripture. Types or foreshadows are not forged by interpreters of Scripture but by the God of Scripture who saw to it that the things that he invested with typological significance were *written down on account* of the latter day people of God, not just for those long ago of whom Scripture speaks. We rightly speak of *typological revelation* but we should not speak of *typological interpretation*. This is because, as Paul leads us to understand, the casting of types does not belong to the one who reads; it belongs alone to the one who originates the text. In the case of Scripture, it belongs finally to the God of Israel, who reveals himself through his prophets. The same is true of every figure, whether a type, an allegory, a parable, a metaphor, an anthropomorphism, etc. Authors cast figures and embed them into their texts, investing them with significance. Readers discover types and the things they signify, but readers do not forge those figures or types. If readers forge types for the texts they read, are they not forgers?

SBJT: Why is biblical theology of critical importance for both academic and church life?

Robert W. Yarbrough: Scholars debate how “biblical theology” (BT) should be defined. One attractive definition comes from the German scholar Theodor Zahn: BT presents the religious doctrine and knowledge present in the Bible in its historical development. Both parts of this definition should be underscored: the religious doctrine or “knowledge”; and its course of progressive unfolding,

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or “development,” in history. Doctrine without history risks becoming gnostic. History without doctrine is a denial of God’s redemptive presence in the world he created and sustains.

BT is of critical importance for both academic and church life. Numerous reasons for this could be given, but I will confine myself to three on each score.

BT is important in academic settings like colleges and seminaries because of its function. As theology was “the queen of the sciences” in the medieval university, BT rightly serves as “the queen of the sub-disciplines” in Old and New Testament studies. All aspects of biblical studies are important—biblical archaeology, textual criticism, exegesis, Pentateuch or Gospels or Pauline studies—but BT is where it all comes together. Without an ordered sense of the whole, analysis of the parts generates merely disconnected details. BT furnishes the synthesis within which the parts make sense. Most biblical scholars will readily confess that their work, however specialized, has been aided by the overarching understanding afforded by a BT standard like Eichrodt or House in Old Testament, or like Ladd, Guthrie, or (recently) Marshall and Thielman in New Testament.

BT is important in academic settings, secondly, because of its history. Today it is a truism that responsible biblical interpretation must proceed with a competent grasp of its heritage. For over 200 years now, since “biblical theology” in its modern sense began with a lecture by J. P. Gabler in 1787, works on BT have summarized and steered the labors of Old and New Testament scholars. To understand the hermeneutical synthesis of Rudolf Bultmann (by common consent the most influential New Testament scholar of the

twentieth century), you can pore over dozens of his essays and grind through a few of his commentaries . . . or you can peruse his New Testament theology, where he puts it all together. Academic approaches to Old Testament BT are helpfully epitomized in the successive, and frequently contrasting, volumes by, say, Eichrodt, von Rad, Jacob, and Walter Brueggemann. I am not suggesting that summaries of BT should replace careful exegesis. But too often exegesis proceeds with an inadequate awareness of any overarching whole. Works on BT can provide a sense of this whole in its various shapes through the generations of scholarship.

A third reason why BT is important lies in the corrective guidance it is frequently able to furnish. Zahn’s definition (above) refers us to what the Lord revealed to the biblical writers in their respective historical settings regarding God, humans, and sin. Receiving their writings as the product of God’s own self-disclosing activity—divine inspiration—BT discovers and surveys the foundation of our own Christian confession and practice. Not that BT can replace the ethics and theology that each generation must hammer out afresh. But it can and must be the starting point, and ongoing reference point, for all of our ethical and theological formulations. These formulations are prone to drift in directions contrary to Scripture. BT can guard us against sloppy proof-texting, remind us of the distinctive contributions of individual biblical writers, and aid us in responsible articulation in “what the Bible says” when we wish to summarize what God’s Word taken as a whole affirms.

But this leads us to the critical importance of BT, not only in the academy, but also for the church.

First of all, BT furnishes pastors with a fruitful framework for preaching. Some frameworks are by comparison fruitless—a pastor can fritter away his years bounding along on some giddy hobbyhorse. But preaching that grows out of a strong sense of the Bible’s historical unfolding, and its world-changing gospel truths, centers on what Scripture affirms. Congregations grow each week in their sense of the Bible’s story line. Old and New Testaments are seen in their organic oneness. Like dense grass crowds out unwanted weeds, the tightly interwoven whole counsel of God displaces the imbalanced renderings of Scripture that abound in every age. The pastor preaches *the Bible, the Word of God*, not some derivative theme or topic (however true or worthy) that fails to capture Scripture’s more central and abiding truths.

Moving from the macrocosmic level of pastoral preaching, we can look at the matter from the bottom up: BT encourages more productive personal Bible study. I take it as an urgent need for every church to have as many people as possible engaged in such study, both on their own and in small group settings. One sure way to discourage this is to fail to equip God’s people with a grounded and growing sense of BT. Then, at best, they limp along trying to sustain daily study on the slender basis of “devotional” reading. The problem is that too much of Scripture is not, in fact, about “me” and my devotional needs. BT frankly recognizes this. Those grounded in it experience that as the light goes on and illumines “the big picture” of Scripture’s message, and the amazing history of God’s work among his people making them sons and daughters of Abraham down to this very hour, personal Bible reading lifts us out of narrow personal

rut. It soaks us continually with the giant splash that God’s gospel truth first made in the epochs that Scripture narrates. We are carried forward by the historical waves that continue to surge through the nations around the globe.

This leads to a third and final reason for BT’s critical importance in the church: it is a springboard for missions. Parochial, agenda-driven, and piecemeal exploitation of Scripture may work at the local or even national level by pandering to folk’s selfish religious expectations. But ministry gripped by BT calls preachers and hearers out of themselves and unites them with the God who reigns over all the ages and all the earth. Such scriptural exposition, pointing to *that* God and his reconciliation of the world to himself in Christ, transcends geography and ethnicity to produce and sustain faith worthy of the adjective *Christian*. What else is missions, whether we are talking about the ends of the earth or the souls of our teenagers and children, who like the nations must discover for themselves the truth of the gospel in their distinct and dynamic settings? But God sent forth that truth in particular times and places and people. BT inventories and recounts those days and verities. In doing so it proclaims them afresh for regions and generations that have yet to hear.