

Editorial: Thinking about Typology

STEPHEN J. WELLUM

Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and editor of *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He received his PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he is the author of numerous essays and articles and the co-author with Peter Gentry of *Kingdom through Covenant* (Crossway, 2012) and *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Crossway, 2015), and the co-editor of *Building on the Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Crossway, 2015 with Gregg Allison), and *Progressive Covenantalism* (B&H, 2016 with Brent Parker), and author of *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (Crossway, 2016) and *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior* (Zondervan, 2017).

All Christians believe in some notion of “typology.” In fact, it is hard to read Scripture and to do theology without it. For example, think of Christology, the study of Christ’s person and work. As we think through how Christ is presented biblically, just think of how Scripture speaks of him: he is the Son, the last Adam, our great prophet, priest, and king, the true Israel, vine, and so on. *All* of these descriptions, whether they are names, titles, or roles he fulfills, are built on typological structures, rooted and grounded in the OT. It is impossible to think biblically about Jesus apart from thinking about typology.

However, although all Christians embrace some idea of typology, there is still debate regarding what typology is, its nature, and how to determine it. In fact, within evangelical theology, ongoing debates between covenant theology, dispensationalism, and progressive covenantalism often center on different conceptions of typology, or at least its application. For example, dispensational theology will rarely affirm that Israel is a “type” of Christ, that Christ fulfills her role, and that all of God’s promises to Israel are realized in

himself and the church. Instead, dispensational theology will often view the Israel-Christ relationship in terms of an analogy, and that the role of Israel, as a national people, is not fulfilled in Christ and the church. Behind this view is a specific understanding and application of typology.

Or, think of covenant theology. When it comes to the genealogical principle—“to you and your children”—commencing in the Abrahamic covenant, and for them, *continuing unchanged* throughout the new covenant—they do not view this principle typologically. Baptists, on the other hand, do view the genealogical principle typologically so that as the new covenant dawns, the relationship between Christ and his people has changed due to Christ’s coming and the inauguration of a new and better covenant. No longer is our relationship to our covenant head through biological/physical relationships but by spiritual rebirth, faith, and covenantal union. Hence the reason by Baptists argue that the covenant sign of baptism must only be applied to Christ’s people, namely believers who have entered into the realities of the new covenant and experienced new birth, the forgiveness of sin, and so on.

These two examples are evidence that ongoing debates within evangelical theology are related to larger debates regarding the nature of typology, although admittedly these debates cannot be reduced to simply polemics about typology. So, even though all Christians affirm “typology,” it is still necessary to say exactly what it is, how it works, and how it contributes to our understanding of how the entire Bible is put together. It is legitimate, then, to devote an issue to the subject of typology, and it is my hope that focusing on this topic will allow us to think better about such an important aspect of reading, applying, and theologizing about Scripture.

To introduce our subject a bit more, let me give a broad overview of the view of typology that most of the articles will be assuming, defending, and employing. The basic definition assumed by most articles is something like this. Typology is the study of the relationship between OT revealed truths of persons, events, institutions (“types”) which God has specifically designed to correspond to, and predictively prefigure, their intensified “antitypical” fulfilment in Christ and his people. This view of typology is found in such works as Greg Beale (*Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), or Richard Davidson (*Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical TUPOS Structures*; Berrien Springs: Andrews University, 1981), and in many other places. Three further points

will develop this basic view.

First, typology is a feature of divine revelation rooted in *history* and the *text*. It involves an *organic* relation between “persons, events, and institutions” in one epoch (“type”) and their counterparts in later epochs (“antitype”). Since typology is God-given and rooted in the text, it is to be distinguished from allegory, which is not rooted in history or authorial intent, and often is more in the eye of the reader than actually *in* the text and something we exegetically discover.

Second, typology is *prophetic* and *predictive*. Typology is a subset of predictive prophecy, *not* in the sense of direct verbal predictions, but more “indirectly” in the sense of predictions built on models/patterns that God intends, that become unveiled as later texts reinforce those patterns, with the goal of anticipating its fulfillment in Christ. As *indirect* prophesy, typology corresponds well to the Pauline sense of “mystery” (see e.g., Eph. 1:9-10; 3:1-10). Paul states that the gospel was hidden in the past, but now, in light of the coming of Christ, is made known and disclosed publicly for all to see. Simultaneously, then, Scripture can say that the gospel was *promised* beforehand and was *clearly* revealed through the prophets (e.g., Rom 3:21), yet, it was *hidden* in ages past and *not* fully known until the coming of Christ (e.g., Rom 16:25-27). Typology, as *indirect* prophecy, helps make sense of why this is the case. Furthermore, given typology’s indirectness, it requires careful exegesis in its immediate context, and it may not be fully recognized as a type until later authors pick up the pattern. Yet, typology is *in* the text, exegetically discovered, and *we* come to know types as God-intended patterns as *later* OT authors repeat the pattern, before it reaches its fulfillment in Christ and his people.

Third, how does typology *work*? It works in a threefold way. Typology first works by way of *repetition* of a person, event, or institution so that types are repeated in later persons, events, or institutions, thus allowing us to discover a pattern. However, ultimately the types reach their antitypical fulfillment first in Christ and then his people.

For example, Adam is a type of Christ (Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:21-49), the covenant head of the old creation. In God’s plan, Adam anticipates the coming of Jesus, the last Adam, and the head of the new creation. How do we know this? In the immediate context of Genesis 1-3, there are exegetical clues that speak of Adam’s significance *and through the covenants* “other Adams” appear

who take on Adam's role (e.g., Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David). Yet, none of these "Adams" are the ultimate fulfillment, though they "predict" the last Adam to come. Furthermore, in Christ and his work, the last Adam, we, as his people, are restored to our Adamic role as image-sons in relation to God and the creation (Heb. 2:5-18). Thus, *through the covenants*, Adam, as a type, takes on greater definition until the last Adam comes.

A second way typology works is by its "lesser to greater" (*a fortiori*) character, as the type is fulfilled in the antitype. For example, through covenantal progression, as one moves from Adam or David, to the prophets, priests, and kings, to the last Adam, the true Davidic king, the great High Priest, the antitype is *always* greater than the previous types. Yet, escalation across time does *not* occur incrementally from the original type to each installment and then to Christ, as if there is a straight line of increase. Rather escalation fully occurs with Christ's coming. For example, Adam is a type of Christ, and "other Adams" arise, yet these "Adams" fail; there is really *no* increase but they all anticipate the last Adam, who perfectly obeys. What is true of Adam is also true of other typological patterns whether they are various persons (Moses, Israel, David, prophets, priests, and kings), events (the exodus), or institutions (sacrificial system, tabernacle/temple). Is the *a fortiori* quality of typology important? Yes. By it, Scripture presents Christ's unique identity and warrants the "newness" of the new covenant. In Christ, although his work involves an important "already-not yet" sense, major changes result, directly tied to *his* coming and the dawn of the new creation.

A third way typology works is that it is developed *through covenantal progression*. In fact, to think through the development of typological patterns is to walk through the covenants. For example, Adam and "other Adam's" are associated with the covenants of creation, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. In these covenant heads, Adam's role continues, and each one anticipates Christ, who by his obedience secures our redemption (see Gen 1-3; 5:1-2; 9:1-17; 12:1-3; Ex 4:22-23; 2 Sam 7:5-16; Ps 8; Rom 5:12-21; Heb 2:5-18). Or, think of the promise to Abraham regarding his "seed." As the seed promise unfolds it does so in Isaac, Israel, the Davidic king, and ultimately in Christ, *and* then to the church as Abraham's spiritual offspring (see Gen. 12:1-3; 17:1-22; Ex. 1:1-7; 2 Sam. 7:5-16; Gal. 3:16, 29). More examples could be given, but it is important to see that typological patterns are developed through the covenants.

With this basic understanding in place, let us now explore various aspects of typology and its application in reading Scripture. Ultimately, an issue and topic like this is important because it allows us to know God's Word better and to see how all of Scripture relates to Christ, and how, we, as God's people, are the beneficiaries of *all* of God's promises in Christ.