Building Biblical Theology

LESSON ONE

WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?

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Lesson One

What is Biblical Theology?

INTRODUCTION

When we meet people for the first time, we often have what we call "first impressions," opinions we form of others at the moment we first get to know them. But as relationships grow, we learn more about our friends by asking them about their lives, their personal histories. As we learn about important events that have shaped their lives, we gain many insights that go far beyond our first impressions.

Well, in many ways, the same kind of thing is true with Christian theology. As followers of Christ, we often begin to form our beliefs primarily from our first impressions of the New Testament. But we can deepen our awareness of what we believe as Christians by learning the history of our faith, how it developed from the opening pages of Genesis to the last chapters of Revelation.

This is the first lesson in our series *Building Biblical Theology*. In this series we'll explore the discipline known as biblical theology, the branch of theology that explores how our faith grew throughout the history of the Bible. We've entitled this lesson, "What is Biblical Theology?" And in this introductory lesson, we'll explore a number of foundational issues that will guide us throughout this series.

Our lesson will focus on three main topics: first, we'll gain a basic orientation toward biblical theology. What do we mean by this terminology? Second, we'll look at the development of biblical theology. What directions has this discipline taken through the centuries? And third, we'll explore the interconnections between history and revelation, one of the most central concerns of biblical theology. Let's begin with a basic orientation toward our subject.

ORIENTATION

Theologians have used the term "biblical theology" in a variety of ways. It helps to think of these uses as falling along a spectrum of broad and narrow senses. In the broader senses, the term usually means theology that is true to the *content* of the Bible. In this view, biblical theology is any theology that accurately reflects the teaching of Scripture.

Needless to say, for evangelicals it's very important that all theology be biblical in this broader sense. We want to be true to the content of the Bible because we're committed to the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura,* the belief that the Scriptures stand as the supreme and final judge of all theological questions.

But contemporary theologians also speak of biblical theology in a much narrower, more technical way. Toward this end of the spectrum, biblical theology is theology that not only conforms to the *content* of the Bible, but also to the *priorities* of Scripture. In

this outlook, biblical theology adheres not just to *what* the Bible teaches but also to *how* the Bible arranges or organizes its theology. It is in this narrow sense that biblical theology has become a formal discipline. And this will be the focus of our concern in this lesson.

Now you can imagine that as Christians throughout the world explore the Scriptures, they've taken many different views on how the Bible organizes its theology. So, it should not be surprising that contemporary theologians have taken different approaches in biblical theology. Time will not allow us to explore all of these different outlooks. So, we will focus on one very popular and influential form of biblical theology.

For the purposes of our lessons, we may define this important form of biblical theology in this way: "Biblical theology is theological reflection drawn from the historical analysis of acts of God reported in Scripture." This definition includes at least three elements: first, biblical theology is based on an interpretive strategy toward Scripture that we will call "historical analysis." Second, this historical analysis is especially concerned with "acts of God" found in the Bible. And third, biblical theology involves "theological reflection" on divine actions in Scripture.

To gain a better understanding of this approach to Scripture, we'll look at these three aspects of our definition. First, we'll explore what we mean by "historical analysis." Second, we'll look at what we mean by "acts of God." And third, we'll explore the kinds of "theological reflections" that take place in biblical theology. Let's consider first the fact that biblical theology is drawn from the historical analysis of Scripture.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

To understand what we mean by historical analysis, we need to review some broad perspectives that we've introduced in other series. In our series *Building Systematic Theology*, we saw that the Holy Spirit has led the church to pursue the exegesis of Scripture in three main ways: literary analysis, historical analysis and thematic analysis. As we have said many times, Christians always use all three of these approaches in combination with each other, but for the sake of discussion it's helpful to treat them separately.

Literary analysis looks at the Scriptures as a picture, a literary portrait designed by their human writers to influence readers in particular ways. Historical analysis looks at Scripture as a window to history, exploring historical events lying behind the Bible. And thematic analysis looks at the Bible more as a mirror that reflects our interests and questions.

Systematic theology is a formal discipline that builds primarily on thematic analysis. Systematicians emphasize traditional Christian themes and priorities that have developed throughout the history of the church. They typically approach the Scriptures looking for answers to a long list of very traditional questions or themes.

By way of contrast, biblical theology approaches the Scriptures primarily with historical analysis. It looks at the Bible as a window that gives access to history. As we will see in this series, when the focus of exegesis shifts from traditional theological themes to the historical events described in the Bible, a very different set of priorities and

concerns emerge. While sound biblical theology does not contradict sound systematic theology, it nevertheless leads to significantly different theological perspectives.

Having seen that biblical theology is based on historical analysis of the Scriptures, we should turn to the fact that it is primarily concerned with the acts of God. The Bible reports many different kinds of historical events, but biblical theology primarily asks, "What do the Scriptures say that God has done?" Because Christians answer this question in different ways, we need to pause for a moment to reflect on what the Bible teaches about acts of God in history.

ACTS OF GOD

One traditional and helpful way to speak of God's activity in history appears in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* chapter V, paragraph 3. Its description of God's activity in the world gives us a convenient summary of some important perspectives. Listen to the way God's providence is described there.

> **God, in His ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure.**

Notice here that the Confession of Faith lists four main categories of divine providence, God's involvement in history, or what we may call acts of God. It identifies these four categories in terms of the ways God involves himself with "means," which are created instruments or causes.

On one end of the spectrum, the Confession mentions that God ordinarily makes *use of means*, that is, he works *through* means. In other words, God accomplishes his purposes in history by acting through various parts of creation. This category includes such things as natural occurrences and daily creaturely activity.

Second, the Confession speaks of God acting *without* means, intervening directly into the world without using any normal means at all. For example, at times in the Scriptures God inflicts diseases on people and heals them without any apparent creaturely instruments.

Third, the Confession speaks of God acting in history *above* means, taking something rather ordinary and making it greater. For example, the supernatural birth of Isaac to Sarah occurred through her union with Abraham, but it happened at her old age, when she was far beyond the normal age for child bearing.

And fourth, the confession speaks of God acting *against* means, causing things to occur in ways that are contrary to the normal operations of creation. For instance, in the days of Joshua God acted against normal patterns of nature when he caused the sun to stand still.

These four categories of God's providence help us clarify what we mean by acts of God. There are times when God works *through* means. Such events often *appear* to have little involvement from God, though he is always controlling them behind the scenes. But other acts of God are more dramatic. When God works without, above and even against created forces, we commonly call these events "divine interventions" or "miracles."

When biblical theologians focus on the acts of God in Scripture, they give attention to this entire range of divine activity, but not evenly. While it's true that they sometimes reflect on ordinary events where God worked through means, they focus mainly on extraordinary acts of God, the times when God works without, above and against ordinary means. And the more spectacular God's work is, the more biblical theologians tend to emphasize it.

Events like the creation; the Exodus from Egypt; the conquest of Canaan; the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ stand out on the pages of Scriptures as times when God intervened dramatically in history. So, when we say that biblical theology draws attention to acts of God, these kinds of extraordinary acts of God are of primary concern.

Now that we have seen that biblical theology looks at the Bible through historical analysis and concentrates on extraordinary acts of God reported in the Scriptures, we should turn to the third dimension of our definition: the fact that biblical theology involves theological reflection on these matters.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

In biblical theology theological reflection is based on historical analysis of the acts of God in Scripture, but historical analysis can take different forms. It helps to think of at least two main tendencies: factual historical analysis and theological historical analysis. These two tendencies go hand in hand, but their main concerns are quite different. Consider first what we mean by factual historical analysis.

Factual Historical Analysis

More often than not, modern readers of the Bible take a "factual" approach to biblical history. That is to say, they are concerned with how the events reported in Scripture fit within the larger environment of the ancient Near East. A factual approach to historical analysis is concerned with questions like the date of the exodus under Moses, the historical circumstances that gave rise to Israel's monarchy, evidences of certain battles and other crucial events. The goal of factual historical analysis is rather straightforward. It's to establish a reliable account of the facts of history by combining what we learn from Scripture with the data we gather from extra-biblical sources.

Theological Historical Analysis

As important as such factual concerns may be, biblical theology is more concerned with theological historical analysis. Biblical theologians are more interested in the *theological significance* of the acts of God reported in Scripture. To understand what we mean, we should turn to a basic definition of theology found in the works of Thomas

Aquinas that indicates what most Christians mean when they speak of theological reflection.

In Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 7 of his well-known *Summa Theologica,* Aquinas called theology "sacred doctrine," and defined it in this way:

> **A unified science in which all things are treated under the aspect of God either because they are God himself or because they refer to God.**

In general, Christians tend to agree with Aquinas that theology has two main concerns. On the one hand, a theological matter is anything that refers directly to God. And on the other hand, a theological matter is anything that describes other subjects in relation to God. The former category is what traditional theology calls theology proper. And the latter category includes matters such as the doctrines of humanity, sin, salvation, ethics, the church and the like.

This twofold definition gives us insight into the ways biblical theology involves theological reflection. On the one side, biblical theologians explore what the Bible says about acts of God to see what they teach us about God himself. What do mighty acts of God reveal about the character of God and the will of God? And on the other side, biblical theology also concerns other subjects in relation to God: the human race, sin, salvation and a host of other topics. Biblical theology opens the way for enhancing and enlarging our understanding of all of these theological subjects.

With this basic orientation in mind, let's turn to our second main topic: the developments that led to the formal discipline of biblical theology. How did it come about? Why have Christians come to approach the Scriptures in this way?

DEVELOPMENTS

We'll look at two dimensions of these questions: first, we'll explore some of the main cultural changes that set the stage for biblical theology. And second, we'll see the theological responses of the church to these cultural changes. Let's look first at the shifts in culture that accompanied the rise of biblical theology.

CULTURAL CHANGES

We must always remember that Christian theologians have rightly sought to fulfill the Great Commission by re-formulating Christian theology in ways that communicate well to their contemporary cultures. In other lessons, we've seen that systematic theology grew out of the attempts of the ancient and medieval church to bring the truth of Christ to the Mediterranean world when it was dominated by neo-Platonism and by Aristotelianism. As Christians met the challenges of these philosophies, they sought to be faithful to Scripture, but also to deal with issues that rose to prominence because of these philosophical outlooks.

In much the same way, biblical theology is in large measure a response to cultural shifts that can be traced back to the Enlightenment of the 17th century. This is not to say that the concerns of biblical theology were entirely new, or belong only to the modern period. Christians have always explored the acts of God reported in Scripture. But in the modern period, significant cultural shifts took place that led theologians to emphasize these historical interests as never before.

Simply put, biblical theology is a Christian response to a prominent intellectual movement in the modern period, often called modern historicism. In very general terms, modern historicism is the belief that history holds the key for understanding ourselves and the world around us. In this view, an adequate understanding of anything can only be gained by considering the place it occupies in history.

One of the most well-known Enlightenment figures who expressed this cultural shift was the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who lived from 1770 to 1831. Hegel is best known for his proposal that every aspect of reality is caught up in logical patterns of historical progress known as the dialectic. The entire universe, he thought, was so ordered by God that it followed a divinely ordained historical logic. From his point of view, we understand every item in the world best when we see it in the light of this rational pattern of history.

This and other forms of historicism rose to prominence in the modern period for many reasons. For instance, avalanches of archaeological discoveries shed much light on the ancient cultures of the world. The science of geology became an endeavor to discern the age and development of the earth, not simply to understand the way it is at the present time. Even biology became historical in its focus as many biologists began to view their field in terms of Darwinian evolution, believing this to be the way life developed on our planet. Similar shifts toward modern historicism took place in nearly every academic discipline, including theology. Everything in life was thought to be understood most thoroughly when it was assessed in terms of the flow of history.

With the emphasis of modern historicism in mind, we should turn our attention to the ways Christian theologians responded to this cultural change. What effect did historicism have on the ways Christians approached theology, especially the ways they interpreted the Bible?

THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES

Historicism has had countless effects on modern Christian theology, but in this lesson we are particularly interested in how it gave birth to biblical theology. Obviously, biblical theology reflects the interest of modern western culture in history. But as we will see, some theologians have embraced historicism in ways that compromised essential Christian beliefs, while others have incorporated valuable insights from historicism in ways that have upheld and have even enhanced our understanding of the Christian faith.

For this reason, we'll trace two major directions that have been taken in the discipline of biblical theology. First, we'll examine what we will call "critical biblical theology," forms of the discipline that have followed the spirit of modernity to the point of rejecting biblical authority. And second, we'll explore "evangelical biblical theology," the ways the discipline has been pursued by theologians who have remained true to the

Bible's authority. Let's look first at the developments of biblical theology in critical circles.

Critical Biblical Theology

Modern historicism inspired many critical theologians to approach the Scriptures with new questions and priorities. We can grasp the heart of the matter by briefly touching on two historical stages of development. First, we'll look at the early stages in the 18th century. And second, we'll describe some of the later developments in more recent history. Let's look first at early critical biblical theology.

It's quite common to trace the origins of modern biblical theology to the inaugural address of Johann Gabler at the University of Altdorf in 1787. Although there were important precursors to Gabler, he spoke of a distinction that has guided Christian theology for centuries.

Gabler distinguished two basic theological endeavors. On the one hand, he spoke of "biblical theology" and defined it as a historical discipline that describes the teachings of the Bible within its own ancient historical context. In his view, the goal of biblical theology was to discover what ancient biblical writers and characters believed about God and the world in which they lived.

On the other hand, Gabler spoke of dogmatic or systematic theology. The goal of systematic theology was not to examine or explain the Bible, but to determine what Christians should believe in the modern world through rational reflection on science and religion.

Now it's important to realize that as a critical theologian, Gabler believed that the findings of biblical theology might be of some interest from time to time, but modern Christians should believe only those parts of the Bible that pass the standards of modern rational and scientific analysis. In his view, the Scriptures reflect the naïve practices and beliefs of people who lived before the modern rational period. And for this reason, systematic theology should be a relatively independent discipline, largely unconcerned with what biblical theology discovers in the Bible.

Gabler's distinction between biblical and systematic theology set directions for critical theologians that have continued even in our own day. But it's also important to see how critical biblical theology has developed in more recent centuries. One feature of critical biblical theology in recent centuries has been the growing conviction that the Bible's historical claims are almost entirely unreliable. By and large, critical scholars have rejected many portions of the Scriptures as erroneous, pious fiction or even outright fraud. From this perspective, the crossing of the Red Sea was nothing more than a strong wind blowing through a marsh, or a small band of slaves escaping Egypt on rafts. The conquest of Canaan was little more than a series of local battles between semi-nomadic clans and city-states in Canaan. As critical theology moved forward, a number of leading critical scholars actually doubted that Abraham was a historical figure, or that there even was a Moses. They even claimed that if Jesus existed, he may have been a great moral teacher, but he certainly did not perform miracles or rise from the dead.

Now, you can imagine that it became increasingly difficult for critical theologians to draw from the Scriptures as they formed their systematic theology. We might have

expected them simply to set aside biblical theology since they thought the Bible was riddled with misleading historical claims. And this has been the reaction of many during the modern period. But the field of biblical theology did not die when critical theologians rejected biblical authority. Instead, they found other ways to use Scriptures for contemporary theology. Instead of treating the Bible as true history, they began to look at the Scriptures as expressions of ancient religious sentiments *presented* as historical claims, and they explored how these ancient religious feelings and experiences might be useful to modern Christians.

G. Ernest Wright, a prominent biblical theologian of the 20th century, expressed this viewpoint when he defined biblical theology in this way in his book, *God Who Acts:*

> **Biblical theology, therefore, must be defined as the confessional recital of the acts of God in a particular history, together with the emphasis drawn therefrom.**

Notice what Wright said here. First, in his view, biblical theology focuses on "the acts of God." But Wright had a very special sense in which he spoke of "acts of God." Instead of focusing on events as they actually happened, Wright insisted that biblical theology must concern itself with the "confessional recital" of the acts of God found in books like the Bible.

In the second place, Wright also believed that biblical theology should be concerned with "the emphasis drawn" from the confessional recital of the acts of God in Scripture. In Wright's view, the history recorded in Scripture was mostly fictional. But when viewed rightly, its stories communicate theological truth. So, the job of the biblical theologian was to discover the theological truth behind the fictional accounts of Scripture.

This approach in critical biblical theology fit well with a distinction that became commonplace in modern theology. A number of German theologians distinguished actual historical events from the confessional history that appears in the Bible by using two different terms. Actual events were denoted by the term *historia*. These were the events in Scripture that could be validated by modern scientific research. But much of the "pious history-telling" that we find in the Bible is not actually history in their view; it is *Heilsgeschichte* — "redemptive history" or "salvation history." Salvation history is the expression of religious sentiments in the form of history telling. Redemptive history is the confessional recital of events that we find in the Bible.

Even today, the majority of critical theologians who do not simply reject Scripture altogether treat the history of the Bible as *Heilsgeschichte*, "redemptive history," "confessional, history-like" theological reflections. While rejecting the historical reliability of Scripture, they salvage Scripture somewhat for their theology by exploring how it reflects human religious sentiments. *Heilsgeschichte*, the traditions of Israel and the early church, is the focus of most contemporary critical biblical theology, and to some degree its conclusions inform modern systematic or contemporary theology.

Now that we have sketched the development of biblical theology as a discipline among critical theologians, we should turn to a second stream of thought: evangelical biblical theology. Here we use the term "evangelical" simply to mean that these Christians continued to affirm the unquestionable authority of Scripture.

Evangelical Developments

Happily, there have been many Christians in many branches of the church throughout the world who have not followed the critical rejection of biblical authority. Without denying the value and importance of scientific research, these evangelicals continue to hold that the Scriptures are true in all that they claim, including what they claim about history. But despite these unwavering commitments to biblical authority, modern historicism has had significant effects even on the ways that evangelicals approach the Scriptures.

To explore evangelical biblical theology, we'll focus our attention in two directions that parallel our discussion of critical approaches: first, the early stages of modern evangelical biblical theology, and second, some more recent developments. We'll touch on the early stages of evangelical biblical theology by looking at the highly influential views of two 19th-century American theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary. First, we'll sketch the outlook of Charles Hodge. And second, we'll look at the view of Benjamin B. Warfield. Let's begin by looking at the way Charles Hodge understood biblical theology.

Charles Hodge lived from 1797 to 1878 and devoted himself primarily to the discipline of systematic theology. Listen to the way that Hodge distinguished biblical theology from systematics in the Introduction to his three-volume *Systematic Theology*:

> **This constitutes the difference between biblical and systematic theology. The office of [biblical theology] is to ascertain and state the facts of Scripture. The office of [systematic theology] is to take those facts, determine their relation to each other and to other cognate truths, as well as to vindicate them and show their harmony and consistency.**

As we see here, Hodge defined biblical theology as an exegetical discipline, the study of the facts of Scriptures. And he also defined systematic theology as the discipline that takes the facts discerned in biblical theology and arranges them in relation to each other, noting their various logical connections.

In contrast with critical theologians, Hodge believed in the authority of Scripture. And his commitment to biblical authority led him to teach that Christians are obligated to base systematic theology on the findings of biblical theology. Instead of selectively rejecting this or that part of Scripture and accepting others, Hodge insisted that systematic theology must submit to all the discoveries biblical theology made in Scripture by putting them into logical order.

Although many of Hodge's perspectives have continued to influence evangelicals long after his death, a significant shift took place in evangelical biblical theology under the influence of one of his successors, Benjamin B. Warfield who lived from 1851 to 1921. His expertise in biblical studies equipped him to make significant contributions to the evangelical concept of biblical theology. Listen to the way Warfield spoke of the concatenation or organization of theology in the Bible in his influential article *The Idea of Systematic Theology*. In part five of this article he wrote these words:

> **Systematic Theology is not a concatenation [logical organization] of the scattered theological data furnished by the exegetic process; it is the combination of the already concatenated [logically arranged] data given to it by Biblical Theology… We gain our truest Systematics not by at once working together the separate dogmatic statements in Scripture, but by combining them in their due order and proportion as they stand in the various theologies of the Scriptures.**

In this passage, Warfield made at least three important points. First, systematic theology should not be a concatenation or organization of separate or disconnected theological statements found in the Bible. Before Warfield, evangelicals tended to treat the Bible as a resource for systematic theological propositions, and they arranged these propositions according to the traditional patterns of systematic theology. The Bible's teachings were summarized in ways that treated them like raw data. But Warfield pointed out that the teachings of Scripture were already logically organized in the Bible itself. The Bible is not a disorganized collection of propositions; it has its *own* logical organization, and its *own* theological perspectives.

Second, from Warfield's point of view, there is not just *one way* theology is organized in the Scriptures. To be sure, the Bible never contradicts itself; all of its teachings are harmonious. But as he put it, biblical theology deals with "various theologies of the Scriptures." The human authors of biblical books expressed their theological views in different, though complementary ways. Their writings reflected varied vocabularies, structures and priorities. The way the apostle Paul expressed theology was not precisely the same as Isaiah; Matthew expressed theology with different terms, emphases and perspectives than Moses.

In the third place, because biblical theology discerns "various theologies" in Scripture, the task of the "truest systematics" was to combine the manifold theological systems of Scripture into a unified whole. Systematic theology was to incorporate the theologies of the Bible "in their due order and proportion." Put simply, Warfield believed that biblical theology is to discern the various theological systems presented in Scripture. And systematic theology is to combine all of Scripture's various theologies into an all-encompassing unified whole. From the time of Warfield to our day, evangelical biblical theologians have essentially followed this basic pattern. They have sought to discover the distinctive theological outlooks of different parts of the Bible, and have conceived of systematic theology as an effort to bring all the theologies of the Bible into a unified system.

With the backdrop of Hodge and Warfield in mind, we may now turn to further developments that have taken place more recently in evangelical biblical theology. Without a doubt one biblical theologian has had more influence than any other on contemporary evangelical biblical theology, Geerhardus Vos, who lived from 1862 to 1949. In 1894, Geerhardus Vos was given the first chair of biblical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. He built on the work of Hodge and Warfield, but he also turned the discipline in new directions.

Broadly speaking, Vos agreed with both Hodge and Warfield that biblical theology discovers the teaching of Scripture and gives authoritative guidance to systematic theology. And beyond this, Vos also agreed with Warfield that sound biblical

theology will discern various theologies in the Bible that must be brought together into a unified whole in systematic theology.

But Vos differed from his precursors by calling attention to a common thread that runs through all of the different theologies in the Bible. He argued that the various theologies of Scripture had a common focus on the history of redemption. He believed that God's mighty acts in history form the core of the teaching of every part of the Bible. For this reason, Vos taught that biblical theology should focus on the ways each biblical writer concerned himself with the mighty acts of God. As Vos put it in his inaugural address in 1894:

> **Systematic Theology endeavors to construct a circle, Biblical Theology seeks to reproduce a line… Such is the true relation between Biblical and Systematic Theology. Dogmatics is the crown which grows out of all the work that Biblical Theology can accomplish.**

According to Vos, biblical theology focuses on the ways biblical writers reflect on history. It discerns the Bible's various perspectives on the great acts of God in history and the theological significance of those divine acts. Then systematic theology brings all that the Bible teaches about the history of redemption into a unified system of theology. In nearly every branch of evangelicalism, biblical theology continues to have this basic focus.

Now that we have seen how contemporary evangelical biblical theology focuses on the history of redemption as the centerpiece of Scripture, we're in a position to turn to our third main topic in this lesson: how evangelical biblical theologians understand the relationship between history and revelation.

HISTORY AND REVELATION

Hardly any two concepts are more central to biblical theology than history and revelation. As we have seen, biblical theology concentrates on history as the unifying thread of all of Scripture. One reason for this focus on history is the understanding that in Scripture, God's revelation of himself is deeply tied to historical events.

To understand the relationship between history and revelation in biblical theology we will examine two issues: first, we'll see how biblical theologians define revelation as "act and word"; and second, we'll explore the contours of history and revelation in the Bible. Let's consider first the idea that divine revelation is both act and word.

ACT AND WORD

To explore these important concepts, we'll touch on three matters: first, we'll see how Scripture speaks of what we will call "act revelation;" second, we'll see the need for what we will call "word revelation" or verbal revelation; and third, we'll examine the

interconnections between act and word revelation. Let's turn first to the concept of "act revelation."

Act Revelation

We all know from common experience that people reveal things about themselves in at least two ways. On the one hand, they can *tell* us what they are thinking. They can speak about themselves and what they want. But on the other hand, we can also learn a lot about other people by what they *do*. The ways they act reveal what kind of people they are. When we look at Scripture, it quickly becomes clear that the Bible often speaks of *God* revealing himself in his actions. For example, listen to the celebration of God's revelation in Psalm 98:2-3:

> **The Lord has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his loving kindness and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God (Psalm 98:2-3).**

Notice that in verse two the psalmist said that God "has revealed" his righteousness, using the Hebrew term *ga la*, meaning to uncover, unveil, or reveal. The psalmist said that God has revealed or uncovered his righteousness in the sight of the nations. But how does this passage say God did this? Was it by speaking the words, "I am righteous," to the nations? Not in this case. According to verse three God's righteousness was revealed when God *did* something. The psalm says that God *acted* in remembrance of the house of Israel so that the ends of the earth "have *seen* the salvation of our God." Here the psalmist had in mind the display or revelation of God's righteousness when he delivered his people. The revelation of which the psalmist spoke was an act of God.

"Act revelation" of this more miraculous sort appears throughout the Bible. For example, the act of creation displayed the power and character of God. The exodus of Israel from Egypt displayed his power over enemies and his love for his people. In a similar way, the establishment of David's dynasty, the exile of Israel and Judah, the return from exile, the incarnation of Christ, the death and resurrection of Christ — all of these, and many other events recorded in Scripture, reveal God's character and will. This concept of "act revelation" is essential to biblical theology.

At first glance, it may not be clear that this shift toward "act revelation" has very important effects on Christian theology. So, we should pause for a moment to see what difference this focus has made. One way to see the significance of this modern historical focus is to consider the doctrine of theology proper, the concept of God himself, and to see how systematic theology and biblical theology approach this topic.

Consider for a moment how the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, representing a traditional systematic theological outlook, teaches us to view God. The *Shorter Catechism* question 4 asks this: "What is God?" And it answers in this way:

> **God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.**

It isn't difficult to see that while this answer is true to Scripture, God is defined in systematic theology rather abstractly in terms of his eternal, abiding attributes. But by comparison, biblical theologians have much more concern with the concrete actions of God in history. And this focus on "act revelation" has led to a different emphasis in theology proper.

When typical evangelical biblical theologians are asked, "What is God?" they would not tend to respond like the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Now, they would not disagree with this view, but their emphasis is much more historical. Biblical theologians are much more inclined to say something like, "God is the one who delivered Israel out of bondage in Egypt;" "God is the one who judged Israel in the exile." Or they might say, "God is the one who sent his Son into the world." Whatever the case, rather than thinking of God primarily in terms of his eternal attributes, biblical theologians think of God primarily in terms of what he has *done* in history. And what is true in theology proper extends to every aspect of biblical theology.

At the same time, while evangelical biblical theologians have stressed the importance of "act revelation," they have also affirmed the crucial need for "word revelation," that is, verbal revelation from God. In the Scriptures, God does not merely act; he also talks about his actions. He explains his actions with words.

Word Revelation

Verbal or "word revelation" is essential for a number of reasons, but we'll mention just two things about God's actions that make "word revelation" so important: on the one hand, the ambiguous significance of events; and on the other hand, the radial significance of events. Consider first how the ambiguity of events in Scripture makes "word revelation" necessary.

When we say that God's acts are ambiguous, we mean that the significance of his actions is not always perfectly evident to human beings. Although God always thoroughly understands exactly what he's doing, his actions need to be interpreted or clarified through words so that *we* can understand their significance.

Consider an example from everyday life. Imagine you're sitting in a classroom with a number of other students, and suddenly, without warning, one of the students stands up. He says nothing; he just stands up. Of course, you would not know what to make of this event; it's too ambiguous. You'd probably wonder to yourself, "Why is he standing? What's happening?" In fact, the professor would probably stop the lecture and ask the student to explain what he's doing. In effect, everyone would be hoping for a verbal communication to clarify the significance of his action.

In much the same way, the acts of God reported in Scripture are often ambiguous to finite and sinful human beings. They, too, are in need of verbal interpretation, explanation in words. Consider, for instance, the time when the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon and began to rebuild the temple. In Ezra 3:10-12, we read these words:

> **When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord… all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord… but many of the**

> **older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy (Ezra 3:10-12).**

Here we see an event in biblical history — a mighty act of God in the laying of a foundation for the temple after Israel had returned from exile. But this event was ambiguous to those who witnessed it.

Some people saw the foundation of the temple and rejoiced because they believed it to be a great blessing. Others, however, wept because they could see that the new temple would never compare favorably with the temple of Solomon. Without verbal communication from God, the event could have been viewed either way. This is why the book of Ezra spends so much time explaining the true significance of the building of the temple after the exile.

In a similar way, in Mark 3:22-23, we read how Jesus' exorcisms were misunderstood by some and how Jesus gave the true interpretation of his actions.

> **The teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons." So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan?" (Mark 3:22-23).**

Some people witnessing these great acts of God wrongly concluded that demons were exorcised by the power of Satan, but Jesus accompanied his actions with *words* to make it clear that he acted in the power of God.

The ambiguity of acts of God recorded in the Bible helps explain why "word revelation" regularly accompanied "act revelation." God's *verbal* revelation explained events to clarify their true significance.

In addition to being somewhat ambiguous, "act revelation" is also coupled with "word revelation" because events are *radial* in their significance. In many respects, an event in the Bible is like a stone dropped into a pond. You know what happens. The water ripples in every direction, touching everything floating on the surface of the pond. The effect of dropping the stone is radial; it radiates throughout the whole pond. In much the same way, events in Scripture are radial in their significance.

Take for instance the event of Israel crossing the Red Sea. We all know how the Scriptures explain that this was God's deliverance of his people from the power of the Egyptians. But we also know that the disruption of the waters of the Red Sea had innumerable other significances as well. For example, it probably affected marine life in the area and thus disrupted the local fishing industry. This consequence may not seem important to us today, but it was important to the people who lived in the area at that time. More than this, the drowning of the Egyptian army had all kinds of significance for the Egyptians. Wives lost their husbands; children lost their fathers. It's hard to imagine the innumerable impacts of this event.

When we realize that events like the crossing of the Red Sea had radial significance, the question that remains is this: Which of all these meanings should be our focus? Which significance is the most important as we try to understand an event in Scripture? The answer is quite simple: God revealed through "word revelation" the most

important significances he wanted his people to understand. Apart from God's verbal interpretation of his actions, we would not know how to draw proper theological implications from the mighty acts of God.

Having seen that act and word revelation accompany each other in Scripture, we should now turn our attention to the ways these two forms of revelation interconnect. In what ways are act and word revelation associated with each other in biblical theology?

Interconnections

For our purposes we will speak of these associations in terms of three types of word-revelation; first, prospective "word revelation," that is, words that *precede* the events they explain; second, simultaneous "word revelation," or words that are given about the same time as the events they explain; and third, retrospective "word revelation," words that come *after* the events they explain.

In the first place, the Scriptures give many examples of times when divine words *preceded* divine actions. In these situations, the word of God explained or interpreted an act of God before it occurred. Often we speak of this kind of "word revelation" as *prediction*.

At times, God's prospective "word revelation" spoke of proximate events and often to people who would directly or indirectly witness an event. For example, in Exodus 3:7-8, before Moses went to Egypt to deliver the people of Israel, God told him what was going to happen.

> **The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of the land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:7-8).**

God's words to Moses anticipated what God was about to do in Egypt. They were prospective, predicting the significance of a future act of God. Upon hearing these words, Moses was to prepare himself for viewing his work in Egypt in a particular way. He was to be the instrument of God's deliverance for Israel. His forthcoming efforts in Egypt were not a mere human event; he was not to reduce his ministry to anything less than it actually was — a mighty act of God through which Israel would be brought into the blessings of the Promised Land.

At other times, God's prospective "word revelation" spoke of events in the *distant* future, so distant that those who first heard his word would not experience the event. In these cases, "word revelation" came a longer time before the "act revelation." For example, the prophet Isaiah spoke of the coming of the great Messiah in this way in Isaiah 9:6-7:

> **For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor,**

> **Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end (Isaiah 9:6-7).**

Here Isaiah spoke of a royal son who would rule over God's people and extend his reign without end. He spoke of Jesus, the Messiah. But these words were spoken at least *seven hundred years* before Christ. They certainly gave hope to God's people in Isaiah's day, but the people who first heard this "word revelation" *never even saw* the divine action to which it referred.

So we see that in a variety of ways, God's prospective "word revelation" was given to grant his people insight into the significance of events before they took place. We find this kind of revelation throughout the Scriptures.

In the second place, it's also important to realize that sometimes in Scripture, God speaks *simultaneously* with an event. Now of course, God's words and actions in Scripture seldom occur precisely at the same moment. But God does often speak in close enough proximity to an event to *treat* it as simultaneous. He often gave his "word revelation" *as* he acted. For example, listen to God's actions and words in Exodus 19:18-21:

> **Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him… the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish." (Exodus 19:18-21).**

The mighty act of God in this passage is God's display of power in the fire, smoke, and violent trembling on top of Mount Sinai. As God was performing this great act, he proclaimed "word revelation" that explained the significance of what he was doing by warning the people not to approach the Mount. So we see then, that often in Scripture, God gave his "word revelation" *at the same time* he acted so that his actions could be understood by those who witnessed it.

In the third place, it's also important to be aware of the fact that God's "word revelation" is often retrospective, explaining the significance of events *after* they have taken place. In these cases, God did something and then spoke of it to people who lived after his actions. In fact, on the whole, this is the most frequent way divine "word revelation" comes to us in Scripture.

Sometimes, God spoke proximately, just after an event had occurred. At these times, he often revealed himself to people who had directly or indirectly witnessed his actions. For example, listen to Exodus 20:2-3, where God explained the significance of Israel's deliverance from Egypt just after it had taken place. There we read these words:

> **I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:2-3).**

The Lord explained to the Israelites that their experience of coming out of Egypt was no ordinary event. It was his personal and direct deliverance. Beyond this, this "word revelation" also explained one of the implications of God's act of deliverance. Because God had delivered them, Israel should not worship other gods. The requirement of loyalty to God was a retrospective word, explaining the significance of Israel's great deliverance to the people who had actually seen it.

Still, at other times, *distant* retrospective word revelation came to God's people, *long* after an "act revelation" had occurred. It was given to people who had not lived at the times when the events took place. For example, in Genesis 1:27, we read this description of the creation of humanity:

> **So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).**

The original recipients of this retrospective word were the Israelites who followed Moses after the Exodus, and they lived thousands of years after Adam and Eve had been created. Nevertheless, God provided this "word revelation" to inform them about humanity's original role in creation. In a variety of ways then, God's word often follows his actions and grants understanding to his people after events occur. This kind of word revelation appears throughout the Scriptures.

Having seen that biblical theology stresses how history and revelation are interconnected in the Scriptures, we need to turn to a second issue: the contours of history and revelation in the Bible. The Bible mentions hundreds of thousands of events over thousands of years. And one of the tasks of biblical theology is to discern patterns and contours among these numerous events.

CONTOURS

To explore the ways biblical theologians have understood the contours of history and revelation in Scripture, we will touch on three issues; first, the goal of God's revelation in the history of Scripture; second, the rising and falling of revelation in Scripture; and third, the organic development of revelation in Scripture. Consider first the goal of history in the Bible.

Goal

There can be little doubt as we read portions of Scripture that God moved history toward many rather immediate goals. In the days of Noah, he acted to bring a new beginning to the world. His goal in revealing himself to Abraham was to call a special people to himself. The goal of Old Testament Israel's deliverance from Egypt was to establish his special people in the Old Testament as a nation in the Promised Land. The purpose of choosing David and his sons as Israel's permanent dynasty was to bring his

people to imperial glory. The goal of Jesus' life, death and resurrection was to secure eternal salvation for God's people.

At each stage of biblical history, God had specific purposes or goals that guided his act and word revelation. Biblical theologians spend much of their time delineating these diverse goals. But at the same time, in Romans 11:36, the apostle Paul pointed to the ultimate goal of history.

> **For from [God] and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen (Romans 11:36).**

As Paul put it here, all things are *from* God in the beginning. All things continue their existence now *through* the sustaining power of God. And all things are "*to him*", that is, they are for God's glory and praise. In a word, God so orders the history of his creation that it will ultimately bring him immeasurable glory.

Different biblical theologians have described this overarching divine purpose in different ways. For example, some speak rather generically of eschatology, or latter days, as the focus of Scriptures. Others have argued in various ways that the Bible is Christocentric, focused on Christ. These and other outlooks have much to offer, but in these lessons we will speak of the goal of all history as the establishment of God's kingdom on Earth. Simply put, we will speak of biblical history as the process by which God will be ultimately glorified before every creature by extending his kingdom to the ends of the earth.

We all know that Jesus taught us to pray toward this end in Matthew 6:10, where he said these words:

> **Your kingdom come,**
> **Your will be done**
> **On earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).**

The divine goal of all world history is the extension of God's perfect heavenly reign to every corner of the earth. When God's will is done as perfectly on earth as it is in heaven, every creature will bow before God and honor him as the divine king, the supreme creator of all. At that time, the ultimate goal of history will be fulfilled.

Now, although every event in the universe moves toward this grand end, the Scriptures themselves focus especially on events that are at the center of God's ultimate purpose. They trace how certain historical events are crucial to reaching the goal of spreading God's kingdom throughout the world. We all know the basic contours of the biblical story. The opening chapters of the Bible describe the way God began to turn the chaotic world into his kingdom by ordering creation and placing his image in the Garden of Eden and by commanding humanity to extend the paradise of Eden to the ends of the earth. But the early chapters of Scripture also describe how humanity rebelled against this divine commission and brought corruption and death into the world.

The rest of the Old Testament reports how God chose Israel as his special people and commissioned them to lead the rest of humanity in spreading the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. As the Old Testament tells us, God accomplished much through Israel, but Israel also failed miserably.

Despite these failures, God did not give up on his grand purpose. As the New Testament reveals, God sent his eternal Son into the world. Through his death, God rectified the failures of the past and redeemed a people for himself from all the nations of the earth. And through Christ's resurrection and ascension, the ministry of the Holy Spirit through his body (the church) and his glorious return, Christ is completing the task originally given to humanity. As we read in Revelation 11:15, Christ is hailed as the one who will bring God's kingdom to earth as it is in heaven.

> **The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 11:15).**

In this approach to biblical theology, every event in biblical history is part of this grand scheme. The vast variety of divine actions, great and small, ordinary and extraordinary, found throughout the Bible, find their culmination in the work of Christ who will bring ultimate glory to God through the establishment of his kingdom in the new heavens and new earth.

While the goal of biblical history is to bring God glory by establishing his worldwide kingdom in Christ, we need to touch on a second dimension of the contours of biblical history: the rising and falling of God's act and word revelation.

Rising and Falling

Maybe you've been to the beach and watched the tide come into shore. It isn't difficult to notice that as the ocean's tide moves forward, it does not do this in one smooth movement. Progress is made, but the forward movement of the tide takes place as waves rise and fall.

In a similar way, evangelical biblical theology has stressed that God has moved history toward the goal of his glorious kingdom in waves of act and word revelation. Although God providentially controls his world at all times, there are times in history when he acts and speaks more dramatically than at other times. And as a result, revelation in biblical history rises and falls, even as it moves forward toward its final destiny.

For this reason, it helps to think in terms of God's act and word revelation in two ways: those times that may be characterized as *low* points of divine revelation; and those times that may be characterized as *high* points of revelation. On the one side, throughout the Bible, there are times of diminished divine act and word revelation, or what we might call low points in history. For example, listen to the way the writer of Samuel described the early days of Samuel's life in 1 Samuel 3:1:

> **The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions (1 Samuel 3:1).**

Revelation was scarce in the days of Samuel's childhood. Because of the sins of his people, God withdrew from them for a period, doing relatively little on their behalf and seldom speaking to them.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of a low point in biblical history is the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament, between Malachi and John the Baptist, when the land of Israel was under the rule of foreign powers. During this intertestamental period, Israel was under the severe curse of God and he did not move dramatically on the behalf of his people; nor did he say much to them.

On the other side, like the crashing waves of a rising tide, there were also high points in biblical history when God's act and word revelation dramatically surged forward. At these times, God did such spectacular things and revealed so much to his people that he actually brought his kingdom to new stages of development. For example, although revelation was scarce in Samuel's early years, as Samuel grew, God began to act dramatically and to reveal his will once again to his people. Through the ministry of Samuel, God increased his act and word revelation so that history moved into the period of Israel's monarchy, into the days of David's dynasty.

In much the same way, the low point between the Old and New Testaments was followed by the greatest revelation of God in the history of the world: John the Baptist and the first coming of Christ, and the grand word revelation that Christ and his apostles gave to us. These mighty acts of God brought biblical history to the stage that we now call the New Testament period.

Surges of divine actions and words in history are particularly important in biblical theology because these were times when God brought his kingdom to new stages or epochs. Major events like the flood, the call of Abraham, the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, the establishment of the monarchy, the exile of Israel and Judah, restoration from exile, the earthly ministry of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit — these events mark times when the kingdom of God on Earth was brought to new stages of development. So, for this reason, in evangelical biblical theology, it is common to divide biblical history into various ages or epochs.

Realizing that the rising and falling revelation of God divides biblical history into periods or epochs raises a very serious question: how are these different stages of history connected to each other? In a word, biblical theology has stressed the *organic* nature of history in Scripture.

Organic Development

Everyone familiar with contemporary evangelical Christianity knows that many Christians today believe that the ages of biblical history are fundamentally disjointed. In this view, periods of time in Scripture have very little to do with each other, especially the periods of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Now, as popular as this approach may be today, biblical theology has demonstrated that the developments of biblical history were organically unified.

The term "organic" serves as a metaphor to indicate that the history of the Bible is like a growing organism whose growth cannot be utterly segmented or broken into separate pieces. In this view, the faith of the Bible is often compared to a seed that is planted in the opening stages of biblical history, then slowly grows through the Old Testament, and finally reaches maturity in the New Testament. The changes that took place between one period and another are viewed as growth or maturation. This growth

takes place unevenly as surges of act and word revelation move history toward new epochs, much the way plants and animals grow more quickly at some times than others. But the periods of biblical history are not separate or discrete segments having nothing to do with each other. Instead, successive stages of revelation are the flowering of earlier stages of revelation.

For this reason, biblical theologians work very hard to see the seeds of New Testament revelation in the initial stages of the Bible and then trace how these seeds grew as further act and word revelation brought successive stages of growth in the kingdom of God, leading to the New Testament.

To illustrate what we mean, let's take a simple example of several central teachings of the New Testament about Christ. We'll focus on God's "word revelation" related to three sets of events in Christ's ministry. Among other things, we learn from the New Testament that the second person of the Trinity became incarnate and lived as the only perfectly righteous human being. The New Testament teaches that Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension secured redemption for his people by paying for their sins, bringing them new life, and granting them the gift of the Holy Spirit. And we also learn that when Jesus returns, he will rule victoriously over the entire creation, utterly defeating his enemies and granting glorious victory to his people in the new creation. These acts and words of God are central features of the Christian gospel.

As wonderful as it is to know and believe these things about Jesus, our understanding of what God has done in Christ can be greatly enhanced when we realize that these New Testament themes actually grew organically throughout the Scriptures. To see how this is true, we'll briefly highlight a few of the ways Old Testament revelation has flowered or matured into what God accomplished in Christ.

What God accomplished in Christ was actually initiated as a small seed in the opening chapters of Genesis. In the first place, at the very beginning in Genesis 1, God gave a special role to humanity in his world as the image of God. As his image, we were called to be the righteous instrument by which God's paradise or kingdom would spread throughout the world. This is one reason the New Testament emphasizes the incarnation and righteous life of Christ. He is the last Adam, the one who perfectly fulfilled the role originally given to humanity.

In the second place, humanity's fall into sin in Genesis 2 teaches us that sin has caused human beings and the rest of creation to need redemption from God's judgment. This need was the seed of the New Testament teaching about Christ's death, resurrection and ascension. He died and rose on high to redeem those who believed in him from the curse of sin. Through Christ's perfect atonement, powerful resurrection and prevailing ascension, we see the redemption of the image of God and the rest of creation.

In the third place, immediately after the fall into sin, God indicated that one day the righteous remnant of humanity would have victory over evil. In Genesis 3:15, we read these words that God spoke to the serpent:

> **And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Genesis 3:15).**

Here God declared that the human race would divide into the offspring of the serpent, or Satan, and the offspring of Eve — those who continued to follow the deception of the serpent and those who took up the course originally given to humanity. As this verse indicates, these two divisions of humanity would be at odds, but God promised that eventually the offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, claiming victory over him and his offspring. And for this reason, in Romans 16:20, the apostle Paul spoke of Jesus' return in glory in this way:

> **The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet (Romans 16:20).**

The victorious return of Christ was anticipated in the very earliest chapters of the book of Genesis. So we see then, that the New Testament teaching about the incarnation and life; the death, resurrection and ascension; and the return of Christ were not brand new ideas. They were planted as seeds very early in the history of the Bible.

In addition to looking at the ways New Testament teaching reaches back to the opening chapters of Genesis, we should also be aware that there are many stages of growth *between* the opening chapters of Genesis and the New Testament. But for our purposes in this lesson, we'll simply touch on one stage of Old Testament history, the times when God dealt positively with the nation of Israel.

In the first place, we have already seen that the incarnation and righteous life of Christ fulfilled the role originally given to humanity in Genesis. But from the time of Abraham to the end of the Old Testament, this motif grew in a particular direction. In a general sense, God called the people of Old Testament Israel to be the faithful seed of the woman, to spread the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. And in a particular way, with the rise of Israel's monarchy, God ordained that a righteous son of David would led faithful Israelites forward in their kingdom destiny.

This is why we find that the New Testament does not simply say that Jesus was a righteous man. In light of the ways that the role of humanity grew during God's Old Testament dealings with Israel, Jesus was born a righteous Israelite. And more than this, Jesus was the righteous king of Israel, the rightful heir of David's throne. The New Testament depiction of the incarnation and life of Christ not only fulfills the original commission given to Adam, but also fulfills the further development of that commission in the Old Testament as it related to the people of Israel and to their king.

In the second place, we've seen that Jesus fulfills the need for redemption that was created by the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. But as we consider how this theme of redemption developed in the Old Testament, we can understand the work of Christ more fully. As we know, God ordained a system of animal sacrifices and worship to deal with the reality of sin in the world, first at the Tabernacle and later at the temple in Jerusalem. These ceremonies were strictly regulated by elaborate priestly orders. But as wonderful as these provisions were, they could only provide temporary relief from the effects of sin. They did not permanently redeem anyone from the curse of God's judgment.

This development within Old Testament history explains why the New Testament emphasizes certain things about the redemption that came through Christ's death, resurrection and ascension. When Jesus died on the cross, he did so as the perfect sacrifice for his people in fulfillment of all the Old Testament animal sacrifices. He was

proven to be the complete and final sacrifice by his resurrection. And even today, as the ascended Lord, he mediates on behalf of his people as our great high priest. And in this role he continually appeals to the merits of his sacrifice as he ministers in God's heavenly temple. So, while the redemptive work of Christ reaches all the way back to the fall into sin in the opening chapters of Genesis, it also grew out of the intervening stages of Israel's tabernacle and temple worship.

In the third place, the New Testament teaching about the final glorious victory at Christ's return also grew out of God's dealings with Israel. When God called Israel to be his special righteous people, he called them to live in victory as the seed of the woman. Gentile nations who followed the ways of Satan opposed and troubled Israel on every side throughout the Old Testament, but God promised ultimate victory to Old Testament Israel as she faithfully spread the kingdom of God. For this reason, it should be no surprise that the New Testament describes the final victory in Christ in the new heavens and new earth as the arrival of the New Jerusalem. As the gospel is proclaimed and both Jews and Gentiles submit themselves to Jesus, the Christ, he builds his church into one body and guides them forward to the promised, final, eternal state of glorious victory.

From this example, we can see how biblical theology looks at the history of Scripture as a growing but unified organic history. Each stage of history builds on the revelation of previous stages and anticipates the ultimate fulfillment of the kingdom of God in Christ. As we continue this series, we'll see that this organic view of divine act and word revelation is highlighted time and again in biblical theology.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've taken our first look at biblical theology. We've gained a basic orientation to this field of study, noting how it approaches the Scriptures with historical analysis of the acts of God. We've also seen how the formal discipline of biblical theology has developed over the centuries. And finally, we've explored its central focus on history and revelation.

Biblical theology represents one of the most influential ways evangelicals have built theology in recent centuries. As we continue to study this approach to Scripture, we will discover that it both complements more traditional approaches to theology, and that it draws attention to many insights that have been frequently overlooked in the past. Well-formed biblical theology will help us to explore the word of God more thoroughly and to build a theology that is true to Scripture and edifying to the church.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is Co-Founder and President of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including *Pray with Your Eyes Open*, *Every Thought Captive*, *Designed for Dignity*, *He Gave Us Stories*, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles* and *Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians.*

Building Biblical Theology

LESSON ONE

What is Biblical Theology?

Faculty Forum

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

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Contents

Building Biblical Theology

Lesson One: What is Biblical Theology?

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Rob Griffith
Jean Mondé

Question 1:
What is the difference between systematic theology and biblical theology?

Student: Richard, could you distinguish between systematic theology and biblical theology, and why is biblical theological theology so important?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it's good to start there because despite the fact that we try to make that really clear in the video, it's not altogether clear to people many times. What is the difference between biblical theology and systematic theology? Well, we have another series called building systematic theology, and we try very hard in there to distinguish traditional systematic theology from what people would call systematics today. And the distinction basically is this, that there's been a long history of the church putting the theology of the Bible into a system, into an organized presentation. And through history, that organization has been shaped largely by the cultures that the church was in a various times — early on in the Neo-Platonic world of the Mediterranean Sea area and then later on in the world of Aristotelianism, and then later on in the modern world of Enlightenment rationalism. And so it took a particular shape, and there was a structure and an order that has become very traditional so that people follow that order whenever they do traditional systematic theology.

Now, more recently, however, this thing called biblical theology that we're talking on in this series has also taken shape. It's become something that is more or less the same when people do it. That's the key here. Now, because there hasn't been such a long history of biblical theology, there is more diversity in the use of that term, but it's taken basic shape, and the basic shape is this: in systematic theology, you can think of it as a triangle or a pyramid of concepts moving from the biggest ones down to the smaller ones. And of course, the big one is God, and then that's followed by other teachings of the Bible that are a little less categorical or a little less comprehensive. You can move down a little further, a little further, a little further, and so the idea is to get sort of a timeless organization of what the Bible teaches as a whole. That's what systematics does. Biblical theology, as it's evolved over the last several centuries especially, has been influenced by historicism which is looking at everything in terms of its, well, to use the modern term, its evolution, its growth. And so when you apply that to the Bible, biblical theology is the attempt to understand the

teachings of the Bible as they developed over time. In other words, the Bible wasn't written in one moment or even one century. It was written over centuries, and its theology developed and grew over time. So rather than looking at the Bible and asking, what are the permanent truths that we can derive from it and stick into our pyramid of systematic theology, biblical theologians tend to ask, how have the various themes of the Bible grown and through various periods of time? And that really is the difference.

Now, its importance is something a little bit different. You could argue, as many do, that it's important because biblical theology is closer to the Bible itself. Now, I don't believe that, okay? And we'll talk about that a little bit more as we go. But many people actually do think biblical theology is closer to the Bible itself than systematic theology. But another reason why it's important is because everybody's doing it now. See, that's the key. I mean, if you go to this denomination, they're doing what they call biblical theology. You go to that denomination; they're doing what they call biblical theology. If you go to a university and you go to a religion class and it's a Bible class, they're doing what they call biblical theology. And the result is that, as various teachers and writers have been talking to each other, there's this sort of growing consensus of what would look to a traditional theologian as a new way of looking at the Bible — biblical theology. And it's cutting across denominational lines. Because systematic theology is different as you go from one denomination to another, from one group to another—it's very different—they have different conclusions they draw. But biblical theologians tend to use the same categories, they tend to come to very similar conclusions, they tend to have the same kinds of priorities, and so it's creating a new form of unity in theology among Christians of many different stripes and brands, and that is probably the reason why it's most important these days.

Question 2:
Which is more important: systematic theology or biblical theology?

Student: So which is more important, biblical or systematic theology?

Dr. Pratt: Hmm. If I was answering the way everybody else answers, I'd say biblical theology, obviously, not systematic theology. And do you know why they say that? It's because when you think systematic theology, they think of things like it's scholastic — meaning it's from Aristotle — or they think it's old, or it's rationalistic. And so it's taking the Bible, they would say, systematics is, and jamming it into categories that are foreign to it. They're Hellenistic categories and things like that. But then they also would say that biblical theology is true to the Bible. Now if you believe that's true, if you believe that systematics is somehow one step removed from the Bible itself and that biblical theology is in between, then obviously biblical theology is more important, because the goal is to make your theology biblical in that sense. Okay? So if it really is closer to the Bible of necessity, well then you'd want to

say it's more important. But I personally don't believe that. In fact, I've been sort of a lone voice in this fighting hard to say no, no, this is not true. Biblical theology and systematic theology are, as it were, both connected to the Bible if they're good. And sometimes they're good and sometimes they're bad. I mean, they can both represent the Bible and they can both misrepresent the Bible. And then I see these two as interacting as equals. Rather than thinking that one is more important than the other, I see them as equals, and the question of importance then is related to what are you trying to do in your particular project? What's your goal? And sometimes, biblical theology will be more important to a particular goal that you have in mind, and sometimes, systematic theology will be more important for another goal that you may have. And I just think it's important to come to the point that we no longer, as has often been done, give people the impression they have to choose between these two and give priority to one over the other. I don't think it's necessary, and in fact, I think it's very harmful to do that.

Question 3:
Do systematic theology and biblical theology inform each other?

Student: So Richard, does systematic theology inform biblical theology? Or does biblical theology inform systematic theology?

Dr. Pratt: Well, my answer is yes, as you would probably anticipate. The idea is that BT — biblical theology — and ST— systematic theology — form what we often call webs of multiple reciprocities because they constantly feed back on each other constantly. Now, biblical theologians, if you talk to one, if they really specialize in this, they usually don't want to admit that they're influenced by systematics. They want to think that all they're doing is just getting what they're getting straight from the Bible and they're just telling you what the Bible says, but they're not. They're not coming as blank slates. They're coming with all kinds of predispositions and presuppositions about what the Bible says, and either formally or informally, they get that from historic Christian theology, which is basically systematic theology. I mean, they may get their basic orientations from a creed, they may get it from a confession, or they may just get it from things they learned as children in church. But they're going to be coming to biblical theology with information that shapes biblical theology. A great example is biblical theology, just like systematic theology, tends to think that the most important concept in the Bible is God. Now where do you get that idea? You certainly don't get that straight from the Bible. You get that from the history of Christian theology through the millennia, especially Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism that emphasize: to understand anything else, you've got to understand the top of the pyramid, which is God. And so as we learned in that series on systematics, that becomes the crucial thing.

Now, in biblical theology, what they say is the acts of God, God in history, that is the most critical thing to be known. Not what people do, not what donkeys do, not what

plants do, but what God does in history in the Bible. And just the priority given to God is itself a demonstration that systematics is influencing biblical theology. I mean, there's just no question that that's true. But it flips around the other way, too. Systematics has always been influenced by the Bible. It's not as if systematicians, Aquinas or any others that you might name in the long history of systematic theology, have been ignorant of the Bible. They know that the Bible has a development. They know that it talks about things, and those things are talked about again and again and again, and that the Bible's faith evolved over time. They knew that. And so when they talked about the Bible in systematic theology, they were in effect doing biblical theology. And so they were allowing that to influence, even at its height, systematics. Okay? Even at its most rational and abstract forms, it was still be influenced by the developments of theology in the Bible. So it's not that one informs the other and the other is simply receiving things. It's that both are always influencing each other, as are a million other things that we're not even mentioning here.

And again, to put that out there is a little bit different than the way most people talk about this subject. I have to keep saying this because in most Christian circles, evangelical Christian circles today, if somebody uses the phrase biblical theology, you're supposed to sit there and sort of take a deep breath and say, "Oh, we are doing something now that's very special and very different than what anyone's ever done before." Especially if you hear them tagging on the front or the back of everything they say "…the redemptive historical significance of…" If they say "the redemptive historical significance of," then they think that somehow they're doing biblical theology and they're doing it in a way that no one has ever done this before. And it's just simply not true. Everyone has known that the Bible is historical, that it talks about redemptive history. Even the most abstract of systematicians have known that, and they have used the Bible with that knowledge in their systematic theology. And so the give and take is extremely important for this main reason, because many times people who do biblical theology today maybe are not quite as self-conscious as they ought to be about traditional Christian beliefs, and so they end up going haywire off into this heresy or that heresy, thinking that they're just doing what the Bible does. But in reality, what they're doing is just poor evaluation of what the Bible does or says, because they're not as conscious of systematic theology — traditional systematics — as they should be. So it's important to keep that reciprocity in mind all the time. Jean, have you ever known anybody who claims to do biblical theology who has really sort of strayed off into crazy ideas or even heretical ideas?

Student: Absolutely.

Dr. Pratt: That's what every cult does, isn't it?

Student: That's right.

Dr. Pratt: Cults do not usually throw away their Bibles. They are really very careful, sometimes, biblical theologians without the restraint and without the guidance of thousands of years of theology that we call systematics. And that's the problem with

most so-called Christian cults, and I think that's the way it is for us today as well, even among sophisticated intellectual types. We've just got to be very careful to know that BT and ST work together all the time.

Question 4:
Does biblical theology reflect the content and priorities of the Bible?

Student: Now Richard, lots of people say that biblical theologians reflect both the content and priorities. Do they really do that?

Dr. Pratt: The content and the priorities of the Bible? Yeah. That's a great question because they'll say that, but the reality is that it's very hard to figure out what the priorities and the content of the Bible actually are. Okay? I mean, because they're different in different parts of the Bible. This is the problem. Now, often what happens is that talk, that kind of rhetoric, comes from the fact that biblical theologians are convinced that the Bible emphases God in history, God acting in history, that this is the centerpiece of the Bible. We'll talk about that more as we go through the lesson. But if you believe that that's true of the Bible, well then biblical theology does emphasize that priority in contrast with systematics which emphasizes God sort of abstract, God in himself, God as Trinity, God as one, those kinds of things. Okay? So that's way up there. So that contrast is often set between systematics and biblical theology, and that the priorities of the Bible are God acting in history, and so biblical theologians think they're emphasizing the priorities of the Bible. But here's the problem. What parts of the Bible talk the most about God acting in history? Rob, what parts of the Bible do that?

Student: The whole Bible.

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's what a biblical theologian would say, but I don't think that's really true is it? I mean, would you say that's true of Proverbs?

Student: Not necessarily.

Dr. Pratt: No, Proverbs is sort of abstract, talking about, you know, things of life, ordinary things of life. "There are six things, yea, seven that have four legs." I mean, there's no act of God in that. Right?

Student: Ecclesiastes.

Dr. Pratt: Ecclesiastes is another. This has always been the problem with biblical theology, and it is that they tend to operate with a canon within the canon. Wisdom literature like Job, like Proverbs, like Ecclesiastes, really don't talk that much about the great and mighty acts of God in history, and if you're a biblical theologian and you're trying to reflect the priorities of the Bible, and you've decided the priority is

God acting in history, well then what do you do with a book like Proverbs? Basically, you ignore it. And if you were to look at most biblical theologies, modern biblical theologies, you'll find they do very little with books like Job and Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. So wisdom literature really is not a high priority for them but see it is a priority for Job. Job is a priority of Job. Okay? Proverbs is a priority of Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes is a priority of Ecclesiastes. And the problem is that different parts of the Bible have different priorities. The priorities of Samuel and Kings are different than the priorities of the book of Chronicles, even though they're covering the same history. The priorities of the four Gospels are very different from each other, even though they are covering the same historical period of Christ's life on earth. And so it all depends on what you mean by priorities of Scripture. When you get that high up in the abstraction, you sometimes lose sight of the specific things that are priorities in different parts of the Bible. And that's where it becomes a problem to say that biblical theologians really are stressing both the content and the priorities of the Bible. Which priorities? I mean, there's a book in the Bible that doesn't even mention God. Which one?

Students: Esther.

Dr. Pratt: Esther, that's right. Okay, so how important then can the acts of God in history be to the book of Esther? Well, there's probably something else that's more of a priority to the writer of Esther than what biblical theologians normally think in terms of. So it becomes a critical issue then when you think you're always stressing what the Bible stresses. You remember that opening triangle in our lessons that we talk about how you can look at the Bible from different angles, one of them being literary analysis, the second one being thematic analysis, and the third on being historical analysis? Well, systematics is basically looking at the Bible thematically according to the themes that arise in the church and answering the questions that the church gets. Biblical theology looks at it historically emphasizing the evolution and growth of theology in the Bible historically. But that's not the only way to look at it. There's another way to look at it, which is what I've been basically doing for the last few moments, and that is this literary perspective, asking what is the priority of each book? What's the focus of each piece of the Bible in its literary presentation? And when you do that, it messes up anybody else who's saying, "I know exactly what the priority of the whole Bible is," because the Bible has different priorities as it addresses different situations.

Question 5:
Why do biblical theologians focus on extraordinary acts of God?

Student: Richard, it seems that biblical theologians focus more on the extraordinary acts of God rather than the ordinary. Why is that?

Dr. Pratt: They do. They focus on what they often call "the mighty acts of God", or the great and mighty acts of God sometimes. And that means things that are more extraordinary, miraculous, in fact: Things like the crossing of the Red Sea. That's classic for a biblical theologian. Or the fall of Jerusalem. That would be another huge, miraculous kind of event. The reason they do that? The cynical answer is because those are the more exciting parts of the Bible. How's that? And I guess in some ways you could say, and I think it's fair to say, that those times when God intervenes dramatically into history in the Bible are more decisive, or they have more powerful ramifications for the direction of history and that sort of thing. Normally — I know it's sort of funny to talk about extraordinary things being anything, so much obvious impact. I mean, there's nothing probably that impacts the Bible more than the exodus from Egypt. Okay? That whole conglomeration of events including the crossing of the Red Sea, it's so big that it's never forgotten. And when you think about the New Testament then, you can think maybe of Jesus and what he did, and that is so big it can't be forgotten. You can't understand anything without a footnote to it, at least. And so you can sort of understand why they do that. But, when you stress the extraordinary acts of God in the Bible to the neglect of the ordinary, then they tend to sort of float in the air. They tend to become sort of objects in and of themselves, sort of floating without any connection to real life. And the Bible doesn't do that. The Bible connects these big events to real people's ordinary lives, and sometimes biblical theology is impoverished because it doesn't stress also the ordinary, daily lives of people, because God was active in their lives, too. I mean, if you think about the Gospels for example, does it just talk about the big things that Jesus did, like his death and his resurrection? Of course not.

Student: He walked.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. He walked around, he talked to people, he touched people, and people reacted this way and that way. Those are part of the gospel message, too. And so biblical theologians do make a mistake if they utterly ignore the more ordinary things of the Bible.

Question 6:
How might biblical theology make use of an ordinary act of God?

Student: Well, can you give an example of how we might focus on an ordinary event?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah. Well, let's take one, or maybe we'll take two, one from the New Testament and one from the Old Testament. Take Jesus and the feeding of the five thousand, think of that for just a moment. You know, what a biblical theologian would tend to do is to talk about the five loaves and two fish that are multiplied to feed five thousand people. Okay? So a great and mighty act of God occurred. Then they'll draw all kinds of theological conclusions from that that God can feed the

billions of people in the world spiritual food, and things like that, and that Jesus was the great Messiah, and things like that. But it's not very careful in the sense that one of the critical pieces of that story of the feeding of the five thousand is what might be called more ordinary, that when Jesus looked at them and saw that they had been following him around and listening to his teaching, and there are five thousand of them, and there are no McDonalds, there are no fast food places out there, they're hungry, they've been with him for days, and he notices the crowd and, as the text says, he had pity on them, he had compassion toward them. Now that's no great and mighty act of God that Jesus had compassion on hungry people who had been following him around. But it's critical to the significance of the entire event. Now see, that's very ordinary, and if you're not concerned about the ordinary and you just want the big things, then you're going to skip right over that as if that has nothing to do with it. And, unfortunately, this is one of the dangers in terms of preaching for biblical theologians — preaching based on biblical theology is always going to the big events and always discounting the smaller, human, ordinary elements of things.

I'll give you another example. It would be maybe the killing of Goliath by David. Okay. So a biblical theologian looks at that even and he says, "Oh, isn't this great. Little David kills big Goliath, and David is the ancestor of Jesus, and so this is a foreshadowing of what Jesus will do one day when he kills the great devil giant, and those kinds of things" — which is all wonderful and true, okay? But they usually don't focus very much on that very poignant scene when David is given Saul's armor and he tries to put it on and it's bulky and big, and he just says forget this, and then he says this line, "I'm going to go in the power of Yahweh, the power of the Lord, rather than in the power of Saul and his armor." Okay? Well, why is that? Why don't we focus on that? Well, it's pretty ordinary. I mean, it's just a young boy trying to put on a man's armor.

Student: It didn't fit.

Dr. Pratt: It didn't fit, okay? So no big deal, right? Let's get to the real important stuff and that is that the little boy killed the big giant. And actually, that scene in the book of Samuel is so very important because it is the memorable and in some ways even laughable scene of this little boy trying to put on this big huge armor and Saul actually thinking that this will help him out. And it sets up the big contrast between Saul and David. Saul is one who trusted in his armor and David is one who trusted in Yahweh, and so you don't want to ignore those kinds of things. You don't want to ignore the fact that Esther was told that if she did not rise to the occasion and take a step out for the people of God, that it wasn't as if God's people would be destroyed, it's just that God would get somebody else. Okay? You don't want to ignore those kinds of ordinary events. And so I guess we have to admit that biblical theologians can't say everything in the Bible, and so if you're going to have to choose and you're going to write a book about the theology of the Bible, you're going to talk about the big events. But when we preach and when we teach based on biblical theology, we never want to allow the extraordinary events of the Bible to so overshadow the

smaller events, because that's where real people live. Where do you live your life, Jean? In the great mighty acts of God or in the ordinary acts of God?

Student: Definitely not. In this present world.

Dr. Pratt: That's right, in this present world where things are very ordinary.

Student: Absolutely.

Student: We change diapers…

Dr. Pratt: That's right. And wash clothes, get up and eat, and things like that. See, that's where real people live. And so teaching and preaching the Bible has to be reconnected from that abstract, great mighty act of God down to real life, and that's why the Bible does it itself.

Question 7:
Do Christians always reformulate theology in response to culture?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you said Christians have always reformulated theology in response to culture. Is that truth consistent?

Dr. Pratt: Is it the same all the time?

Student: And everywhere?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, that's a great question, because we usually talk that way, don't we? Evangelicals always talk about God's unchanging word and a changing world. I mean, how many books have been written with that kind of byline in it — the unchanging truth in a changing world? And we do want to say that's true. There are senses in which truth is truth no matter who you are, where are, or what time of day it is, or what universe you're even in for that matter, I guess. We'd have to say when God speaks, when God reveals himself, he does so out of his own character, and his character doesn't change, and so there is real truth to saying that truth is always truth. Now having said that, that's not the same as saying that good theology is always the same. Because I think that the basis of having a theology to begin with is not to teach the truth of the Bible — emphasis on the truth of the Bible — it's to teach the truth of the Bible effectively. In other words, it's to communicate the truth of the Bible.

Remember that when Jesus gave the Great Commission, he didn't say "Go ye therefore and read the Bible to people." He said, "Go therefore and teach all nations." And there's a big difference there, because as you go from nation to nation, or culture to culture, or time to time, you have to teach the same body of truth — say that's the Bible — in different ways. This is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians of course, that "I

became all things to all people so that by all means I might save some," because as he went from one group to another, he had to stress different things, he had to emphasize different things, and because we can't always emphasize everything all the time, we're always prioritizing, always setting up what we're going to focus on. We have to learn how to do that in relation to the people we're trying to reach with the Gospel. And so, given that kind of motivation for theology, that the Great Commission is the reason we do theology — whether it's biblical theology or not — we're always responsible to formulate in a way that will communicate. Otherwise, we're just doing it for ourselves. I mean, being a theologian is a spiritual gift. Much like the apostle Paul told the Corinthians that if you're speaking and tongues and no one's there to interpret it, go home and speak in tongues. Edify yourself at home.

And in some respects, the same thing's true for theology. If you're speaking about theology in ways that don't edify, in other words, people can't understand, go home and do it, because theology is designed to communicate what the Bible teaches effectively. And to do that, we always have to be reformulating theology, because the priorities, the effects of sin, the issues that people face, the needs that they have, they're changing constantly throughout history, and they are different in different parts of the world at every single time. So it's not to say that there's no truth that we're aiming toward, there's no absolute that we're striving to understand, but theology is always short of that. Theology is always a process of application. And so when you're living in the world of the Neo-Platonist, you present Christianity in Neo-Platonist terms. That's what they understand, that's what they like, that's how sin has arisen in their lives, so you're answering their questions, much like Paul did when he was in Athens quoting Greek poets. He didn't say, "Now this isn't quite true because I'm quoting a Greek poet." No, he quoted the Greek poets in 17:28 of Acts, and he did that openly because he was trying to address their needs. But when he talked to Jewish communities, he is quoting the Bible all the time and referring to prophecies as they understand them, and all those kinds of things.

So it's just a matter of emphasis, a matter of priorities, a matter of taking into account where people are. That's the sense in which we always reformulate. And you remember that the issue for biblical theology is that it rose to prominence in the modern world after the Enlightenment, because one of the key principles of the Enlightenment was the best way to understand anything, including religion, is to understand it in terms of historical development. And it's not as if that were a brand new idea, but for Neo-Platonists, for example, that historical development's really not all that important. What's most important is the abstract. So when you're speaking to a world where historical development is the central issue philosophically, culturally — when you're living in a world of Darwin or you're living in a world of archeology and those kinds of things — of course, to speak to that world, you have to speak about the way the Bible developed, too.

Question 8:
Is it dangerous to reformulate theology in response to culture?

Student: Now Richard, aren't there dangers in doing this, though? I'm thinking of the obvious syncretism that has taken place with the Roman Catholic Church moving into Latin America. Talk about that.

Dr. Pratt: Well that's not the only example. Syncretism is the danger. If you're going to adjust your theology to meet the needs of the cultures and the people at various times and places, you're always going to run into the problem of syncretism, of mixing Christianity with things that are not Christian. But let me just start off by saying we always do that. We just cannot avoid it, because we all bring ourselves to the process of theology, and because none of us is perfect yet — the only person that didn't syncretize his religion with others was Jesus I suppose, and maybe we'd have to say Bible writers when they were under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But when we talk about ourselves and the church's theology, we all know that syncretism is always the great danger. My favorite quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson is "A man sits as many risks as he runs," which means that if you sit down, you're risking just as much as getting up and running; it's just that you feel safer. Well, when you try not to address the issues of the day, you may feel like you're safer, but you're really not. You're actually quite syncretistic. And so it's better to acknowledge it and to go ahead and do it as best you can. Now in Haiti, where you're from, syncretism is obvious, right?

Student: Very much obvious, especially within the Catholic Church there is a lot. For example, you have saints that are the patron saint of a city, and during festivities all of that is brought in together with all the voodoo ceremonies and different things like that that goes on. And the people, they are, I would say, nominal Catholics, but at the same time they are celebrating the saints or doing the Mass, they are still doing…

Dr. Pratt: It sort of gets mixed in with the magic and that sort of thing?

Student: Absolutely. Into a lot things.

Dr. Pratt: Now, you know it's easy as Protestants to point the finger at Catholics and say they're doing that, but do the Protestants in Haiti do this?

Student: They do it as well.

Dr. Pratt: Uh huh. I mean, if nothing else, they're at least becoming syncretistic with American values.

Student: Absolutely. Yes.

Dr. Pratt: Because it's the Protestants that are down there doing their thing — American Protestants — and so they become like us, singing the songs we sing and having the values we have and things like that. I just think we have to admit that that's the case. Other cultures mix their religion with things like magic and things. We, as North American Protestants, tend to mix ours with the golden arches, meaning free enterprise, individualism, money is important, those kinds of things, which is just as syncretistic. But biblical theology was attempting to make the Bible's theology relevant to a world that was moving in the direction of historicism. See, that's the key. And that's why it grew so fast, that's why it's become so important, and it's also why it has been able to provide new insights. And yes, is it somewhat syncretistic? Well, of course, all theology is. But still, at the same time, the reason for theology is to communicate according to the ways people think, where they are, and when they are. And so I think we just have to admit that that's the case.

Question 9:
What is the difference between critical and evangelical biblical theology?

Student: Now Richard, can you give us the difference between critical biblical theology and evangelical biblical theology?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, that's a very critical issue on this lesson, isn't it? Because I really do try to trace out the differences between these. And let me just start off by saying that we're taking two things as if they're utterly different and utterly separate that are really on a continuum here. There's more evangelical biblical theology and more critical biblical theology, so it's not as if these are utterly distinct things. But for the sake of discussion, the basic difference is belief about the inspiration and authority of Scripture. There are people who do what they call biblical theology who do not believe in the authority of Scripture, or "sola scriptura" as we are prone to say in our circles. And then there are others that do biblical theology, this historical approach to theology and the Bible, who do believe in the authority of Scripture. And that makes a big, big difference, because, well — in a number of different ways — but the main way is this, that people who believe in the authority of Scripture believe that it tells the truth about history so that when the Bible says things like Jesus was born of a virgin we believe it's really true. When the Bible says things like Jesus resurrected from the dead, we believe that's actually true.

And so when we talk about acts of God as evangelicals and want to focus our theology on these great and mighty acts of God in the Bible, we're talking about real space and time. Critical biblical theologians came under the heavy influence of archeology and scientific research during the Enlightenment period and after to the point that they no longer believed that the Bible told the truth about most things, in fact. I mean, I think if you were to talk to most critical theologians today, they would say that the Bible, well, has the authority to tell the truth that the telephone book has.

In fact, they would probably argue that the telephone book probably says more truth than the Bible does, because they question all of its historical claims and only believe those things that can be validated by archeology and science and those sorts of things. And so they have a process that is dependent on history, but they don't believe that the history of the Bible is true, what we would call true or real history, space and time history. And this leads them then to a quandary — and I'm sort of summarizing hundreds of years of thought on this — but it leads to a quandary. If you don't believe that the Bible tells you the truth about history, then how are you going to base Christian theology on the Bible anymore? How are you going to do this? And an evangelical will quickly say, well, you can't, so throw away your Bible. But they're not going to throw away their Bibles.

For one thing, their jobs depend on continuing to use the Bible, and they still have churches that people go to, and they have, as they would call them, simple-minded lay people who still believe these things, and they don't want to destroy all of that. And so what started developing in critical circles was a concept of "*Heilsgeschichte*," or redemptive history. Now by this they didn't mean, as we often do when we say redemptive history, things that happened in real space and time that had redemptive significance. What they meant was a way of talking about your faith, a way of talking about your religion that was history-like. It was sort of an expression of ancient people's religious feelings. So, for example, the crossing of the Red Sea. There are different theories among critical scholars, but one theory is that what actually happened at the Red Sea was a group of about 70 slaves made it across a body of water near the Dead Sea on rafts, and then the Egyptian army followed them on their own rafts, but a storm came and destroyed the Egyptian army, and so now these simple-minded ancient people developed the story into God opened up the waters for us, we walked through on dry land, then he destroyed the Egyptians, and it gets bigger and bigger and bigger as they tell the story over and over and over again. And this becomes their salvation history, which is not so much a reference to real events but a reference to their feelings and their religious sentiments. And those sentiments then become the resource of biblical theology when you're in critical circles.

Question 10:
Why do critical biblical theologians value *Heilsgeschichte* or redemptive history?

Student: So Richard, what good is the *Heilsgeschichte*? What good is that then if it's not real history?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's a really good question, and that's the question that I've asked many of them before. I think, in a word, basically this is it: most critical scholars have reduced religion down to a sort of common human experience that gives us psychological support, gives us moral support, gives us a place to lean on in life when you have doubts and fears and troubles and, for some of them, even gives them hope

that there is such a thing as a God and an afterlife, and things like that. And so — this is to put the best spin on as possible — these critical scholars are wanting to connect to that religious consciousness of ancient Israel. They're wanting to learn their joys and their pleasures and their exhilarations. They're wanting to learn how to express these feelings — and I do mean feelings — feelings of God in their own lives today by using the various myths and various stories and things like that that ancient people used. Because they're westerners, they tend to use that biblical tradition rather than, say, some other tradition like Hinduism or something like that. And they would put it that way. They're trying to connect the inter-psychic connection between themselves and the ancient people of Israel and the early Christian church. And it really does get down to that. These people, therefore, in their liturgies in church will talk about the resurrection of Jesus, and they'll talk about his death, and they'll talk about his miracle birth and all these miracles that Jesus performed, or even Old Testament miracles, as if they actually happened. They won't stand up in church and say, "Now, we know that didn't happen." They'll talk about them as if they happened, but in their studies they know it didn't happen. And so they're giving people the ability to connect on that inter-psychic level, and that's why *Heilsgeschichte* became the object of concern in critical biblical theology.

Question 11:
Why is it important to realize that the Bible records actual history?

Student: Well, the question is obvious then, why is it so important that the Bible is giving us an actual history?

Dr. Pratt: It's important for evangelicals and for me personally because if these things did not actually happen, then we are without hope in the world. If the Bible is just another record of the way ancient people used to feel about God and now we know better, then we are in deep trouble. Because you can feel all kinds of things. I feel all kinds of things all the time; I have these inter-psychic experiences with people all the time. I share the miseries and the joys and the hopes of humanity all the time in my life, but we are resting our faith, like the Bible does, on real historical facts. When Moses sang the song at the Red Sea, he was not making it up. He was not taking what actually happened, 70 people on a raft, and making up that God had opened the waters. He actually saw it with his own eyes. When the gospel writers talk about the life of Jesus, they're talking about things that they, as John puts it — I touched with my hands, we have touched, we have heard, we have seen. We know this is real, and reality is something that, in my opinion, the Bible bases faith commitment on, historical realities, and not on made-up events or traditions of events that reflect the human religious consciousness.

Question 12:
How can we prove that the Bible records true history?

Student: Richard, how do we substantiate the fact that these are actual truths and facts that we can prove, and this is not something that we just believe? It's just a matter of faith? How do we make that known to the critical biblical scholar?

Dr. Pratt: Well, evangelical scholars do that all the time. They argue whether or not there's archeological evidence for the Bible. We try to convince people that there have been many situations where they have discounted the Bible's record, but time as proven that it actually did happen the way the Bible says. Of course now, there are many things in the Bible that you could never prove. Okay? I mean, how could we ever prove apart from the Bible that the water opened up rather than a group of seventy people on a raft? You can't do that. Nobody took a video of it or anything like that. But there are plenty of other things that scientific people have discredited in the history of biblical interpretation that have proven to be true later on as more research came in. And as those things happened, then the credibility of the Bible's witness overall, including those things that you could not really validate like miraculous things, axe heads floating on water, things like that, they become more credible as the more ordinary things are validated, the more ordinary historical claims. Because you get the very strong sense then that Bible writers would not have been basing their theology on made-up things. This is not Alice in Wonderland. This is real history, and the more that the verifiable things of the Bible story can be validated by legitimate means, by empirical means, then the better we are at then helping people understand that even the miraculous is true. But it does take a work of the Holy Spirit. Okay? And that's where it comes down to, because people will believe anything except the Bible to keep from having to reckon with God. I've seen that so many times, it's unbelievable. They'll believe the most ridiculous explanations, the most elaborate and complex explanations of things in biblical studies to avoid having to deal with the God of the universe face to face, and that reality keeps them sometimes from even accepting the most obvious kinds of empirical data that we can bring to bear on these issues.

Question 13:
How did Hodge's view of evangelical biblical theology differ from Warfield's view?

Student: Richard, can you talk a little bit more about the distinction between Hodge and Warfield? I don't know that I caught everything that was going on there.

Dr. Pratt: It's a hard one. Let's see if we can back up just a little bit and say this: We're distinguishing between critical biblical theology and evangelical. The critical biblical theologians are the ones that don't believe that what really happened, or what the Bible says happened, actually happened. So they have their *Heilsgeschichte* over

there. Okay. So let's push them aside for a moment and stick here in the evangelical track. Now there are many people who are evangelicals who have used the term biblical theology, and for convenience sake, what we do in the lesson is we zero in on probably the most prominent of those, at least in North America, and that's as it developed at Princeton Theological Seminary. Okay. And that means first Charles Hodge. That was a big step. And then the next step is B.B. Warfield. And then there is a step beyond that with Geerhardus Vos. And in some ways, this is not the heart of the matter, but it helps us understand why people thought this way and how things have moved to where we are today. I think that's all that's important about this.

Hodge looked at the Bible much like a bubblegum machine with all kinds of different colors of bubblegum in it and little balls of bubble gum, and that the task of a systematic theologian was to empty out the bubblegum machine and take all the yellow bubblegum and put them in the yellow box and take all the blue ones and put them in a blue box, and the green ones and the orange ones, and put them in all these different parts of a box that had compartments in it. You'll remember that basically the movement of those bubble moved this way, the little balls of gum move that way on the video. Well, we're just thinking about a little different metaphor here. And the reason for this was, he looked at the Bible basically as, to use modern terms, as a database for theology. It had dogmatic statements in it. It had propositions in it that you would either find explicitly in a passage, or you could derive or infer from a passage. And if a passage talked about the doctrine of God, well then it was a yellow one, so you put it in a yellow box. If another passage talked about the sinfulness of humanity, a blue ball let's say, he took that out and he stuck that there. So you would categorize all these sort of relatively loose data of the Bible.

The reason Hodge thought that way was because he was operating with a Kantian view of natural science, which was the popular way of doing things in his day, and that was basically that the world around us has all this raw data and that the role of the scientist is to put it into categories in his mind, to categorize the raw data that's out there. So the Bible's the raw data of theology, and you put it in its right categories. Okay. Well, fundamentally, there's probably not a whole lot wrong with that so long as you qualify it in certain ways as Hodge and his practice actually did, though not in theory. In his systematic theology he actually described it as sort of bits and pieces that the theologian organizes.

Now Warfield comes along. He was the successor of Hodge and systematic theology eventually, but before he became a systematic theologian officially, he was New Testament scholar. That's a problem, because when you start reading the Bible, the neat system that Hodge created begins to fall apart, or becomes a little more complicated. Because Warfield, knowing the New Testament, realized that the New Testament itself had already organized the teachings of Christ and the teachings of the apostles. And in fact, the Old Testament had organized the teachings of our faith and that this organization needed to be recognized, as you go through the process of making systematic theology and then even biblical theology, it needed to be recognized, that the Bible wasn't like a big bubblegum machine with all these

different little colored balls in it that just stick into the right hole. Rather, they had systems within the Bible itself. You can think of the bubblegum pieces as sort of stuck together; water got in there and clumped them there together and clumped some others together, and clumped some others together inside the big glass sphere. And Warfield was enough of a Bible scholar to realize that was the case, that Paul had a theology, and that John had a theology, and Matthew had a theology. In fact, Warfield actually said there are many theologies in the Bible. Now that was a radical step, that there wasn't just one theology in the system of theology in the Bible that the systematician discovered, but rather the Bible itself actually had multiple theologies in it. So yeah, Matthew had his theology, but it was different from John's — not contradictory, but different. And Paul had his and it was different from Peter's. And you mustn't break those systems apart to do systematic theology, for Warfield, but you have to accept those systems. You have to embrace them and then try to find the sort of mega system that embraces all of them. That was Warfield's notion of what systematic theology did.

Now for Hodge, biblical theology was just doing basic exegesis of the little balls in the bubblegum machine. That's all it was, figure out what the passage says, now you take that dogmatic statement and stick it into the right hole. For Warfield, it was understanding all those little pieces according to their systems of Paul's theology, of John's theology, of Luke's theology, of Matthew's theology, Isaiah's theology, and understand them in terms of their own theological structures. Does that make sense? How they batched together? That's what he called biblical theology. In other words, it wasn't just doing basic exegesis, but it was actually figuring out the mind of Paul, the mind of Luke, the mind of Isaiah. And when you saw how they organized their thinking, that's what he considered to be biblical theology. And then you took all those clumps and brought them into systematics. And so what that opened up was all kinds of insights into the Bible that people really, in broad terms had not seen before. I mean it used to be, literally was true, that people would think of the Bible as a book that was given by God and that had very little organization to it in terms of its thought, in terms of its system. And then when they thought of it having a system, they thought it was just one big system that God had ordained. But now Warfield is saying no, no, there are many different systems in there, and what systematic theology has to do is take those little systems that BT, biblical theology, discovers and create this mega system out of all of them. And so that's the difference.

Student: So B.B. Warfield basically would say that there is sort of a symbiotic relationship between biblical theology; there's a sort of interaction between…

Dr. Pratt: Well no, I don't think so. I think it's still very linear. He still thinks you move from the Bible to biblical theology, discovering all those various clumps of bubblegum, and then you take that and then systematic theology has to bend a knee to that. He still thinks biblical theology is closer to the Bible itself. I'm the one that believes in the symbiotic, okay? Everybody else believes it goes like this: You go Bible, biblical theology, systematics. Then I'm the one that says no to that. I hate to say that because I'm about the only that says that. But I think the key here is just that

Warfield thought it was already organized at this stage of biblical theology, and that became very crucial to the difference, and it just opened up vistas of new insight that people hadn't had before. So rather than trying to coordinate everything that Moses said with what Isaiah said, people began to say, well, what did Isaiah say? What was his theology? What's his distinctive characteristic? What did he emphasize? What did he give priority to? What was his vocabulary?

If you think about it just in terms of vocabulary — this is a good way to think about it, though it's more complex than this. The old model of Charles Hodge would be this: We find a vocabulary word, a theological term in the Bible and it sits there like one little separate piece of bubblegum, and I've got my categories over here in systematic theology, and I'm going to take it and stick it in there. Okay? Like the word justification. There's a passage that says somebody's justified. So, okay, it goes into the category of justification. Now what Warfield said was that little ball has been organized in certain ways by Bible writers into a whole theology. And I think all of us know that James used the word justify differently than Paul did. So James has got his theology over here using the word justified in one way. Paul has his theology for…it's a little more complex than this, but let's just say simply in this way, okay? And so Warfield says now what systematic theology has to do is deal with both of those, so that as you move towards a systematic doctrine of justification, it's got to include what Paul said and what James said. Now in theory, that's sounds very nice, very simple. But unfortunately, systematic theology has a life of its own that for centuries different Christian traditions have defined words like justification in particular ways, and they have not always embraced all the variety of the Bible's use, and then the rub comes. And so what Warfield did was open up great vistas. And that's the basic distinction. If you think of them as loose data for Charles Hodge to get stuck into systematic theology because of exegesis or biblical theology, or you think of them as clumps of these balls that biblical theology discovers that get then put into systematic theology. But in all cases, systematic theology has to submit to what the biblical theologian, whichever form you take, what he discovers.

Question 14:
What was Vos' view of evangelical biblical theology?

Student: Okay, now I do understand the difference between Hodge and Warfield. Can you talk a little bit more about Vos and his perspectives?

Dr. Pratt: Oooh. Yeah, and I think…Let me just say this, that it's important to understand why I talk about Vos. Vos was the first person in the North American scene ever to hold an official chair of biblical theology at Princeton, but it had grown so much because of the work of Warfield that it actually wanted to become its own department. It never quite became its own department, but he was actually the chair of biblical theology. This is what Vos was. And so it is important to sort of get the difference between him and Hodge and Warfield. So let's just retrace here for a

moment. You go from Hodge having all these little data bits that you do biblical theology on which is identifying what color they are by basic exegesis then bringing them over to systematic theology. Warfield said, no, the bubblegum is in clumps because every Bible writer has his own theology, and that's the role of the biblical theologian is to discover the clumps, and then you bring them over to a mega systematic theology that incorporates them all. Well, Vos was not satisfied to say that there are many theologies in the Bible. He wanted to ask the question, what unifies all of those different theologies. He didn't' deny that there were different kinds of theological systems in the Bible. I mean, who could possibly do that? How could you deny that the system of theology for Paul is not contradictory but different from James, or better, Paul from Isaiah or the writer of Chronicles? Obviously there are differences there, though they are not again contradictory in an evangelical point of view.

But Vos was concerned to say, is there something that unifies all of these? Is there something that makes them cohere together? Is there a mega system in the Bible itself in other words? Is there something underneath all of this variety that biblical theology is discovering that can bring a unity to it in biblical theology so that biblical theology more or less would be able to discuss the whole Bible in a unit. And his answer was yes, there is. And his answer was this basically. There is a thread, a golden thread that runs through every single theological system of the Bible from Moses in Genesis all the way through to John in Revelation, and this is the thread — redemptive history. Now on the one side you sort of go, okay, I can see that. The Bible is about history so you can think of the clumps of bubblegum that B.B. Warfield discovered — various systems of theology in the Bible — and think of them, as it were, attached to a string and surrounding a string so that this long string called history, redemptive history, has these clumps of theology around it. But what was unifying them all is that string of history.

And so history started becoming the focus, and redemptive history especially, meaning the great and mighty acts of God, became the subject matter that Moses was talking about. It became the subject matter of Isaiah. It became the subject matter of Paul. It became the subject matter of John and of Peter and of James. But they're all talking about basically the same thing and that is this history that's running through the whole Bible. And Vos thought he had found the key in many respects to the unity of the Bible. With all of its diversity, there is a unity, and the unity is that all of the Bible writers are theologizing, they're making theological reflections in different ways on this one thing, and that's the mighty acts of God in history. Well, on the surface of things, who could debate that? Because that makes good sense doesn't it, on the surface of things? But in reality, there are some questions that need to be raised about it, and it's certainly not the only way that a person could talk about the unity of all the theologies of the Bible.

Student: I think his favorite nickname for biblical theology was historical revelation.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. The history of revelation. That's right. And in fact, John Murray often refused to use the word biblical theology and wanted to call it theology of redemptive history because it's not particularly biblical. It's a slice of the Bible. It's a way of looking at the Bible, which is what we'll argue as we go through these lessons. But that is the key. So when you hear people talking about the Bible from this Vos approach, they're keenly concerned with, what does this passage say about that golden thread of history? What does that passage say about that golden thread of history? Let's say you're preaching this way, if you don't take them to redemptive history, if you don't take them to some big event that occurred in biblical history, then you're not doing your job. And later on as this develops, it becomes the great event of Jesus and his death and resurrection. That becomes the focus. So every single passage in the Bible then becomes suddenly talking about Jesus and his death and resurrection, which is where we are today, where most evangelical biblical theologians are saying every single passage in the Bible is doing this kind of a thing. It's somehow talking about Jesus of Nazareth, or so-called Christocentric or Christ-centered preaching and teaching, and you're not doing your job unless you have somehow taken this passage, connected it to history, that thread, and traced that history up to Jesus.

Question 15:
If we focus entirely on Jesus and redemptive history, what might we miss?

Student: Now that sounds great and wonderful, and I probably would do that in the pulpit, but what am I missing if that is my primary focus?

Dr. Pratt: Well, you're missing so many things that it's hard to even number them all.

Student: Give me one example.

Dr. Pratt: Well, let me just say it this way. Sidney Greidanus did a study of preaching in the Reformed Church of Holland, and part of what he did in that study — it's called Sola Scriptura, it's actually a dissertation of his many, many years, decades ago. One of the things he did was he compared the style of preaching, one being moralism and the other being redemptive historical. Now you understand when I say redemptive historical it means doing this, this passage talks about the thread and takes you to Jesus. And one of the things he noticed in all of that preaching and teaching was that it was highly objectified. The preaching and teaching reaches its zenith when you are talking about an object; the object is redemption in Christ. And so your practical application of the sermon was, think more about Jesus. Okay? Think more about Jesus. And preaching never came down to, now tomorrow when you get up in the morning, this is what you need to be thinking about and doing with your life and feeling with your life; this is your relationship to your husband or to your wife or

to your children or to your boss or to your employees. None of that was ever preached about because that was considered moralism, and moralism was sort of a taboo word. Because in this view, every Bible writer is not doing moralism, every Bible writer is talking about the thread of redemptive history and tracing it up to Jesus, and that's what preachers out to do, talk about objective history and bring it up to Jesus and you're finished. Well the results, of course, was that you had lots of people going, "Wow, that's a very interesting passage and I never knew that Jesus was there before, now I do," and going home and not knowing what to do about it.

We do have things like that going on even in our circles today. They substitute the word "gospel" often for Christ in that system, that every passage must be brought to the Christian gospel or to Christ as the Savior, that kind of thing, which is fine. It is a part of what we do when we preach, but it's not all that we do. We haven't reached the Zenith. And the problem is that often that kind of Christocentric or gospel-centric preaching is so objective that it becomes abstract for people's lives. It doesn't touch where they actually are. Now I think that when we look at the New Testament especially — but it's even in the Old Testament — when you see how they often, and they are talking about redemptive history, but what they do with that is they talk about what you're supposed to do tomorrow morning, how you're supposed to tie your shoes, whether or not you're supposed to work…

Student: Raise your children.

Dr. Pratt: …or how you're supposed to raise your children, how you're supposed to be compassionate to people. These are very practical or daily things that you find in the epistles of the apostles. And that seems to me to be the big thing that we miss if we take this redemptive historical center and reduce the Bible down to that string. Even if you take it up to the end of the string — Jesus. And there's another thing that's very interesting about this approach. It's interesting that when go from these clumps of bubblegum on the string — you go from the clump to the string — we're talking about something that God did and this somehow anticipates Jesus up here. But oddly enough, in most preaching, it's only talking about the first coming of Jesus. It's very seldom that you hear people talk about the second coming of Jesus and the implications of it for that. And they certainly don't talk much about the in-between time, which is the more practical side of this. What do we do in between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus? And so I think a lot is missed in preaching and teaching when you have this as your exclusive approach, as great as the insight was, because there is sense in which all of the Bible is about this progressive revelation of God, this evolving revelation of God, this developing revelation of God that climaxes in Jesus — not just his first coming, however, his second coming, too. And so when we do this, I think we have to be very careful not to take an approach and treat it as "the" approach.

Question 16:
Why are both act and word revelation important?

Student: Now Richard, when evangelicals typically use the word revelation, they're talking about word revelation, and it seems that with BT we have this change where now we're talking more about act and word revelation. Could you talk about that?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it is a change. It is a shift at least of focus. And you can understand why, because in systematic theology, what are you interested in? You're interested in ideas, and the ideas sometimes are pretty abstract, actually. And so revelation is God disclosing things about those ideas, and so it has to do with words and phrases and sentences and things like that that God uses to tell us what to believe about things. And so word revelation, that is, God speaking about things, even in Scripture because it's words, that becomes the centerpiece, almost to the point that we forgot that God doesn't just reveal himself in words, but God also reveals himself in actions. Now why do you think biblical theology emphasizes the acts of God as revelation?

Student: Because it's focused on history.

Dr. Pratt: Because it's focused on history, exactly. So, if you agree with Vos that the thread that runs through the whole Bible is history, redemptive history, then God doesn't just disclose himself in words, he discloses himself in actions. And I think it's fair to use the human analogy. I mean, how do we know each other? Well, we will ask questions of each other. We'll say, "Where are you from?" and you'll respond with a word or sentence or something like that. "What do you do?" We talk about things, and so we learn about each other. You self-disclose in language. But if a person is asked the question, "Are you a nice person?" and the person responds, "Yes, I am a nice person." Alright, now that's a self-disclosure. But if the person then does something that's not nice, we might wonder whether or not the words were true. And why would we do that? Because the action of the person, as we even say often, speaks louder than the words. So the action of the person is also self-disclosing.

And that's the way it is with God, too. God doesn't just reveal his mind to us, but he also reveals himself to us by acting. And when you look at words in the New Testament and in the Old Testament, like *galà* in the Old Testament — that means "reveal" — it often does not speak about God talking about things, or Bible writers talking about things or writing about things, but rather God disclosing himself by doing something. We gave an example in the lesson itself that when God reveals himself to the nations, he does so by destroying them basically. He doesn't stand up there and say, "I am God" in some verbal declaration. Instead, he demonstrates what it means to be God by doing something. And that is very critical in biblical theology. The act revelation and the word revelation, those two go together in evangelical biblical theology.

Student: I see. So as an example, you would say the act of creation, God creating the world, would be an example of God revealing himself through action, and then the description, the biblical description that follows would be revealing himself in word.

Dr. Pratt: Yes, that would be exactly the kind of distinction we want to make. Now there are other levels that we could go at that. For example, in Genesis 1 itself, it actually says that God said certain things at that time back then about the creation that he had made. Remember what he said?

Student: "It is good."

Dr. Pratt: "It is good." That's right. So the event of making it and then God's words about it, It's good, it's good, it's very good, that becomes very critical to a biblical theologian, both of those things. What is God doing and what is God saying? And oddly enough, sometimes, even spokespeople for God, spokespersons for God like angels, or even people, these become vehicles by which God's word is revealed. And it's very interesting even when you think about Jesus as the Word of God, John 1, that as the Word of God, he is not just the one who teaches the truth verbally, but he embodies the truth, he lives the truth; he acts in ways that reveal what God is like. Jesus didn't say, "If you have learned my lessons, you have learned about the Father." What did he say? "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father," which has to do with a much bigger picture than just his teachings. And so when you look at a Gospel like Matthew where he is constantly juxtaposing Jesus's teaching with the miracles that Jesus did, back-and-forth, back-and-forth, back-and forth. He is operating with this idea that the revelation of God in Christ is both word revelation and act revelation. The Sermon on the Mount would be what kind of revelation?

Students: Word revelation.

Dr. Pratt: Word revelation, that's right. But then the miracles that he performs right after the Sermon on the Mount are his act revelations.

Student: His response to John the Baptist when John the Baptist doubted. That's another example of him using actions, saying, "Look at what I did."

Dr. Pratt: That's right, take a look at what I've done. That's disclosure also. And so these two have to go together, and the conjunction of these two is what biblical theologians emphasize. It's not as if this is brand new because this is something that was known forever among Christians, but it's the emphasis on the pairing of these that becomes so central to biblical theology. They're not just interested in learning abstract truths about God. They want to know how those truths of God are, as it were, incarnated in acts of God, brought into real history. And that is central to the whole program of biblical theology.

Question 17:
How is act revelation "radial" and "ambiguous"?

Student: Now Richard, in the lesson you talked about the fact that we need word revelation because act revelation is "radial" and "ambiguous."

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, I mean, we don't talk that way very much, and it can be problematic for people, because I think most of us sort of assume that when God does certain things in Bible history, first we can understand it, and then we even go further than that and think that we've understood all of its significance. And that's what those two words, ambiguous and radial, are pointing out here, first that we don't often understand bare facts the way that they should be understood. They're not clear as to what their significance is. They're ambiguous. And then the fact that they are radial means that their significance is so great we could never understand everything about them.

So let's just talk about those two for a moment and see if we can't get it. When we say that God's acts are ambiguous, we certainly don't mean that their significance or meaningfulness is ambiguous to God. God understand them. He understands them fully, completely. But the problem is that when something happens in the world as an act of God, whether great ones or little ones, extraordinary ones or ordinary ones, we often don't know what to do with them. We don't know how to understand their significance. Robert, have you ever been in a situation where something has happened and you don't know how to take that as a sign from God as to whether you should go this way or that way?

Student: How many times do you want me to recount?

Dr. Pratt: This is the reality, right? We often face this situation in our personal lives when you think of an open door. Okay, so an opportunity comes up. Alright, there's an act of God, an opportunity, a door is opening. This is a small personal example, but now is that door that's opening up a temptation for you to stumble and fall? Or is this door opening up an opportunity for service? You see, that's the problem. Without somebody explaining to you what that is, you're left with some ambiguity. You don't know exactly what to do with it.

So here we have a situation for example — here's one in the Bible. Abraham was living in his day and there was a famine in the Promised Land. Okay. Now that's all the Bible says, that there was a famine in the land. Now this was an act of God, we know that. And normally in the Bible famines are connected to judgments of God against a place, and I guess if I were pushed and really had to give an answer, I would say that probably this was a curse of God for some reason. I don't know exactly what the reason would be, but it was a curse of God. But the Bible doesn't tell us. It doesn't explain why there was a famine, what anyone had done to create this famine. It just says there was a famine. And for this reason, even though we might be pushed

toward thinking, well, it was because somebody did something wrong, we would be open to the possibility that it was just one of those things that happened, that God just made it happen as a famine like he has other famines occur on the earth without blaming anybody, or even trying to figure that out. So that's what I mean when I say ambiguity.

Take for example something that we just consider crystal clear as to its significance, the resurrection of Jesus. Now see, when you think about the resurrection of Jesus as a Christian, it's hard for us to sort of get out of our skin and think for a moment — now wait a minute, that's an ambiguous event. If I don't have somebody telling me its significance, I don't know what its significance is. Now as someone from Haiti, in Haiti people rise from the dead all the time, don't they?

Student: They do.

Dr. Pratt: They do indeed.

Student: I have never been to Haiti.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. You need to go there so you can understand the ambiguity of rising from the dead. Because there were plenty of people in Jesus' day who were explaining his resurrection along those lines. "Well, the guard stole the body." That was one word that tried to explain what happened. "Well, he wasn't really dead." Or, "Maybe he rose from the dead like lots of people have risen from the dead. In fact, we've heard of that Lazarus guy; he was raised from the dead by Jesus himself." So, was Lazarus' resurrection, did that prove that he was the Lord of all creation? No. So there is some ambiguity in the act itself. It's not as if the act speaks for itself, especially all the layers of theological reflection that the New Testament puts onto the resurrection of Jesus. And that's a great example because we are often so inundated and so accustomed to thinking about an act of God in the Bible in a particular way that we don't realize that without the teaching of the Bible, the word of the Bible, the word revelation, that that event itself can be very ambiguous. Okay, so there's the one side of ambiguity. And there are lots of events in the Bible that are like that.

Now the other side of it is not that just events in themselves are sometimes quite ambiguous to human beings, but also that events are radial, and by that I mean it's more or less like a radio wave. Do you know why we call radio waves radio waves? It's because they are radial; they go in every direction. And they're not directional signals. They go out in every direction. So they impact everything in every direction. So that's more or less the way events are. When an event takes place in the world, depending on your philosophy of how events connect to each other, there's the potential of huge implications and effects on all kinds of other events in every direction imaginable. I mean, the fact that we're sitting at this table is keeping you from being home. And you've turned off your telephone so you're not taking phone calls. Now who knows what effect that may have on countless people out there in the

world today? So your being here does not just affect our making this program, it affects other things as well that we don't even recognize.

We give the example in the lesson of the crossing of the Red Sea and how it probably messed up the fishing industry for quite a while, and how…can you imagine the psychological trauma it caused the Egyptian children whose fathers died in that event, and the wives whose husbands died in that event? I mean, there are implications and effects of events that just go in every direction imaginable. And so what we find in the word revelation of God is that the word revelation helps us narrow down what kinds of effects and what kinds of significance we're supposed to contemplate and at least take as our main concern. So when you think about the resurrection of Jesus, this made the women who came to the tomb, the empty tomb, happy. Now, how important is that? Are there other significances, or is that it? The Bible even tells us that it made them happy. They ran with joy. Is there any other significance to that event of Jesus's empty tomb? His resurrection?

Student: Well, many, like it's an indication of God's promise to us of our resurrection, but we don't know that.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. Was that written on the wall?

Student: It wasn't.

Dr. Pratt: It was not written on the wall. Do you think that the two women that saw the empty tomb that they thought that that was, "Oh, man! Now we know that our resurrection is secure because Jesus was resurrected"? Do you think it was self-evident? No, it took some teaching and some understanding of that. That's the point. So the word revelation of the New Testament is all about explaining what that even meant, what its significance meant. And as it radiates out like this, its significance moves in all these different directions, it touches this person in this way, it touches that person in that way. It moves in this direction so that, for example, if you were an unbeliever and you learn that Jesus was resurrected from the dead then it would have the implication for you, it would have the impact on you that, my goodness, Jesus really is the judge like he said he was. I need to repent of my sins and come to him.

For the Christian whose Christian mother just died, like in Thessalonians when people were dying unexpectedly, it had another implication, and that was don't worry about them, they're not going to be left out of the resurrection. In fact, they'll be in front of you, because this is the way it goes: Jesus, then those who have fallen asleep, and then you. So it has all kinds of implications because it has this kind of radial significance, and we look to the revelation of God in words in the Bible to help us understand what those ambiguous and radial events actually should mean for us.

Question 18:
How do epochal shifts correspond to periods of increased revelation?

Student: Richard, describe for me again how epochal shifts correspond with the rises in biblical revelation.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, that's important, because later on we're going to see that this idea of epochal shifts is central to biblical theology. So let me see if we can just back up and say it this way. In the Bible, acts of God don't come at a constant rate; they don't come at a constant speed, so that the history of the Bible is a simple upward curve like that. It's not that way. Instead, what you find is just sort of like mountain peaks and valleys. It's goes up and down in different ways at different times; God is involved and then God isn't so involved, God is involved, God isn't so involved. And the funny thing about it as you look at the Bible is that as God moves through history, he's taking history to new stages of revelation, and it's not as if you've got this stage and it's disconnected from the next, but rather you have this stage of revelation, and then there's this increase of God doing things that takes everybody involved with God, or everybody involved in God's kingdom to a new level. And then things go along for a while, and then there's this huge increase of God doing things, and then it takes them all to another level.

Student: Would that be like the Exodus following a period of slavery?

Dr. Pratt: That's exactly right. So there are these events that come along, and conglomerations of events, and then even word revelation gets wrapped in there. They increase. And that moves the whole system of Bible theology to sort of a new stage. The word epoch simply means age or period of time. The older word was dispensation — and there's nothing wrong with saying that word, it's a perfectly fine word — that the Bible has different dispensations or different periods of times, or different epochs. And if you were to think about it, for example, we have the period of time before sin comes into the world. So certain things are revealed by God, and it's fairly status quo until you come to, boom!, sin. And then you get all these new revelations about what sin is going to do to you now, and God talks about all of this, all this, and all this. And things go along at a pretty even pace until, boom!, you get the next thing which would probably be the call of Abraham, the choice of Israel as the special people of God. And a lot of revelation occurs, God does a lot of things in words and in actions and explains things a lot, and so you're moved to this new level, what we often call the patriarchal age or the patriarchal period. And then as you move forward in that, you get this kind of lull as Israel is in Egypt for several hundred years. Nothing is really happening, nothing is really being said much to them, and so the Bible kind of skips over that a little bit and summarizes it in a snapshot and then, boom!, all of a sudden here's Moses. And with Moses comes new acts of God and new words of God that take Israel to a new stage. You're no longer to be slaves, now you're to be moving back into this land, taking control of it. You're now a great nation, not just tribes but a great nation. And so what's happening is that waves are

going up and down here, but every time there's this major surge of act and word revelation, then you have the people of God, the kingdom of God, Bible faith, Bible theology being taken to a whole new level that it had never reached before.

Question 19:
Doesn't God constantly provide revelation?

Student: Well, how can we say revelation rises and falls and surges when God reveals himself all the time?

Dr. Pratt: That's a good question. Because it does sound that way, doesn't it? It sounds like we're denying that God is revealing himself all the time. I guess we have to just make that qualification. We have to qualify first that God is always revealing himself in general revelation, so we know that everything that happens, no matter what it is, is a revelation of God's character, his invisible attributes, Romans 1, and his moral demands on humanity. So we know that this is true, so there is a sort of constant baseline, I guess we'd have to say. We could also say that, I guess, the earlier distinction we made between more extraordinary acts of God and more ordinary acts of God, that when I say there are these surges, it's concerning, and concentrating on these extraordinary acts of God. But I'm sure that in individuals' lives when they were in Egypt — we just said that was a low point, slavery in Egypt — I'm sure that God was revealing himself to people, individuals and groups of people of Israelites in a very dramatic way for them. This is not to say that God is inactive in individuals' lives or groups of people, but by comparison, you wouldn't want to say that a father receiving an answer to prayer in Egypt for his son who had fallen down that day and broken his leg, even if it was a miracle that occurred that the son's leg was suddenly healed, you would want to say that's of less dramatic significance than the crossing of the Red Sea.

Now how do you measure significance? That's another story. I guess we'd have to say because the Bible doesn't talk about that very much, it's probably not as important as what it does talk about. But apart from that ambiguity, we do want to say that these are the more extraordinary acts of God that occur. Boom! And it pushes things forward. We use the analogy of a tide coming into a beach. You know, the tide comes in and moves further and further up the beach, but it doesn't come in at an even pace. It comes in as waves hit the beach, and when that wave hits the beach, it pushes things a little bit forward, and then it goes back. Then another wave comes and it goes in a little bit farther. And then the next wave comes and it goes a little bit farther. And that's more or less the analogy we're trying to bring here. When God moves his people to new periods of time where there are substantial, significant changes in the way he relates to them, the theology that they are to believe, their understandings of things, the ways they're to behave and feel about him, those new stages come with surges of divine revelation. This is one of the things that Geerhardus Vos emphasized in his biblical theology.

And of course, as you think about it, the greatest period of time in the Bible's history when there was a low level was between the Old and New Testaments when Israel was being punished by God by removing revelation from them, by removing these kinds of things, and so nothing much was happening until here comes John the Baptist, and then here comes Jesus, and there's this sudden surge of the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus. Now things are kicked into the new stage called the New Testament. So I just think we have to recognize that revelation has not been constant but has moved from sort of age to age with these surges.

Question 20:
How should shifts in revelation influence modern application?

Student: Richard, I'm thinking now how do I apply this as a pastor? And can you just talk about how to take these surges, the rises and falls of God's revelation and apply that knowledge to the person in the pew who's suffering today?

Dr. Pratt: What difference does that make? Well I think, let me say, two ways. One would be sort of on a larger scale and then on the more personal level. On a large scale, any time you look at any passage in the Bible, you've got to ask the question, what period, what surge, what epoch is it talking about, because there is an integrity to the epoch. Now there are fuzzy edges on each side, at the beginning and the end of each epoch, but as you're inside of this period of time, God is doing things in a particular way, and he's expecting particular kinds of responses. And if you're living in another age, you're not supposed to be responding exactly like people back here were responding in their age. Now you can go crazy about that and say that they're so different you can't connect them at all. That wouldn't be the case. But for example, if you were living in the days of Moses, you were supposed to worship at the tabernacle and make your sacrifices at the tabernacle. Well, now we live in a day after Moses, let's say, another period whatever it may be — David, in between the testaments, now and the New Testament. We're not supposed to go to a tabernacle and make sacrifices any more. So I think that that's one practical lesson that every time we use any Bible passage, we've got to ask what's the system of theology that's in operation within that epoch when that passage is given to the people of God in the past and make the right kinds of adjustments for people that we're ministering to today.

The other thing to say, I think, on a more personal level for people is that even in our personal lives, God is not "steady as she goes" in speaking to us, in leading us, in showing himself to us, and there are times in our personal lives — we call them, dry periods or the dark valley of the soul, those kinds of things where you feel as if God has left, and then you have other times when you have heightened experience of God and those sorts of things. This is the nature of relationship with God. It's much like a human relationship. If you have constant and intense, steady-as-she-goes relationship with another human being, you'll go nuts. Human relations have that kind of back and

forth to them; even husbands and wives and children and parents have that kind of back and forth. And that's the way it is with God and his connection, or our experiences of him, go back and forth like that, too, on a very small scale.

So I think that part of this surging can help people by analogy anyway to understand what's going on in their lives; there are times when God is very active and deeply involved in a person's life, and then there are more ordinary times. Sometimes people ask me this question, they say, "How often should I feel an intense experience of God?" And that's a good question. And there's no easy answer, but I will say this, basically, we ought to hope that we have it at least once a week. I mean, that's what going to church is all about. That's what Sabbath is all about, to have a day when you are in the presence of God in a way that you're not normally there. And anyone who says that they are praying when they're at work like they pray when they're in church is either not praying at work or not praying at church. It's one of the two. And if somebody says I experienced Jesus's presence with me when I'm changing diapers the way I do when I'm in a worship service, well then they don't know what the experience of Jesus is, because it is a dynamic thing. On that personal level, I do think that's a very important thing to keep on saying to people.

Question 21:
How is the history of revelation "organic"?

Student: Now Richard, you spoke about the history of revelation being organic. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Dr. Pratt: It's an obscure word, isn't it? It's not one we use very much. I think the idea is basically this, that just like we normally think of everyday life, the hours of a day are just ways in which we make separations or divisions of something that really can't be utterly divided. I mean, let's face it. You think about it's now 9 o'clock, now it's going to be 10 o'clock, it's going to be 11 o'clock. Well, we know that's something of an artificial construct that we put onto something that flows the whole time. Okay? And it's that flow that we're talking about as being organic. So the history of the Bible is that way. The theology that's revealed by the special acts of God and the words of God are also organic in the sense that they develop out of each other; they flower out of each other rather than being, God does this and now he does something completely separate from that, and then he does something completely separate from that. These are things that grow into each other. That's a wonderful thing to realize about the Bible, because if anybody reads the Bible with much seriousness at all, they realize that the faith that is taught in the early parts of the Bible is very different from the faith that's taught in the later parts of the Bible. I mean, let's face it. Anybody who comes to you and says, "Last night God spoke to me and told me that I'm supposed to sacrifice my child today," what would you do?

Student: Smack 'em.

Dr. Pratt: Smack them. Call the police. Call them crazy. Whatever, right? But you realize that there was a time when God did that. In the life of Abraham when God did that, no one was supposed to take him to the police or anything, or even stop him. To do that would have been to disobey God. So in that sense, Abraham's faith is very different from our faith today. If we can't recognize that, then we are not realizing just how much the Bible grew over time, how its theology grew over time, and how new revelations always had an effect on prior revelations.

The organic character of this is also a part of this idea that new revelations are not just added on top of old revelations, but they seep down into the old ones and transform them, give them new significance, give them new meaning, like liquid being poured into liquid, so they mix together and they grow, as it were, like a flower grows. I mean, think of your own body. You know, we're told that every seven years every cell of our body has been replaced. So does that mean that you're a completely different person? In one sense yes, but in another sense no. You're still the same person as you were seven years ago. So now the question is, the Bible is growing like our bodies, is it a completely different religion early on than later on? No. It's the same religion, it's just a religion that was revealed gradually and slowly by God for a variety of reasons: One, and primarily because I think people just couldn't take very much, and God was accommodating people's ability at the time where they were in the history of the world. And so it gradually and slowly, organically develops. Now you've known people I'm sure, Rob, that want to throw parts of the Bible away because it doesn't match up with their own faith. Have you seen people like that?

Student: I have, yeah.

Dr. Pratt: You know, there are lots of people in the world today who use lines like, "Well, that's just the Old Testament." And they throw it away. They act like it's irrelevant because it's in the Old Testament. This view of revelation is different. An organic view of the history of the Bible is different from that. It says you can't throw it away because it's earlier. But at the same time it says you can't go back to that earlier stage as if you lived there either. Instead, you have to move forward with the Bible and see it's development over time and let that organic growth come to you as well and to realize where you are in that organic growth. It's a wonderful thing that biblical theology has done in this respect, because there are groups even here in America, for example, who have tended to chop the Bible into separate periods of time and say, "That part's irrelevant, that part's irrelevant because it's earlier. Now we're in the New Testament. We don't need all that Old Testament stuff." Well, biblical theology has broken lines among Christians right here, because biblical theology has seen that the Bible treats past history differently than that. It doesn't say it's irrelevant. The New Testament quotes the Old all the time, and biblical theologians of all varieties and stripes of systematic theology are now able to see the relevance of earlier things in the Bible for later periods of time, like the New Testament.

And that's one of the great gifts of biblical theology that we ought to be delighted to know about and delighted to explore, because in some ways, the faith of the New Testament — that tiny little part of the Bible that's about that big — it's like a black and white sketch. It has no color because it gets color, its dynamic from the Old Testament, and that color has got to be brought in and it's being done that way in many different circles.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is the President and founder of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including Pray with Your Eyes Open, Every Thought Captive, Designed for Dignity, He Gave Us Stories, Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles and Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians.

Building Biblical Theology

LESSON TWO

SYNCHRONIC SYNTHESIS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Synchronic Synthesis of the Old Testament

INTRODUCTION

I recently bought a desk that needed to be assembled, and as I opened the box an avalanche of pieces fell out on the floor. There were so many pieces that I could tell it was going to take a very long time to figure everything out. But hidden among the parts was an instruction booklet. So, I sat down and began to read.

The first two pages were devoted to step one. The next pages were step two. Step three followed. As I read through the booklet I was so relieved to find out that the long process of putting the desk together was broken down into separate steps.

Well, in many ways, the same kind of thing is true when we try to understand the long history of Old Testament Scriptures. There is so much information about acts and words of God, people and places, that the task can seem overwhelming. But if we take a synchronic approach, if we break its history into separate steps and concentrate on each step as we put the whole thing together, we will find that the task is much more manageable and much more beneficial.

This is the second lesson in our series, *Building Biblical Theology*. We have entitled this lesson, "Synchronic Synthesis of the Old Testament." In this lesson we'll see how biblical theologians explore what God has revealed to his people step by step at particular times in Old Testament history.

In our previous lesson, we saw that historically, Christians have used three main strategies to understand the Scriptures: literary analysis, looking at the Bible as a literary portrait designed to convey certain perspectives; thematic analysis, looking at the Bible as a mirror reflecting our contemporary or traditional topics and questions; and historical analysis, looking at the Bible as a window to the historical events that it reports. We also saw that biblical theology focuses primarily on historical analysis of the Scriptures, looking especially at the ways God was involved in historical events reported in the Bible.

For this reason, we said that: "Biblical theology is theological reflection drawn from historical analysis of acts of God reported in Scripture." Biblical theology focuses on Scriptural accounts of God's activities and draws inferences for Christian theology from those events. With this review in mind, let's turn to the lesson at hand.

In this lesson on synchronic synthesis of the Old Testament, we'll touch on three main issues. First, we will gain a basic orientation about what "synchronic synthesis" is. Second, we'll look at the ways Old Testament passages convey the historical information *used* in synchronic synthesis. And third, we'll focus on the synthetic theological structures discovered through synchronic syntheses of the Old Testament historical information. Let's begin with a basic orientation to our subject.

ORIENTATION

To understand what we mean by "synchronic synthesis," we'll touch on three issues. First, we'll define the term "synchronic." Second, we'll turn to the term "synthesis;" and third, we'll illustrate and legitimate what we have in mind with an example from the Scriptures. Let's begin with the meaning of the term "synchronic."

SYNCHRONIC

The word "synchronic" derives from two Greek words: the preposition *sun* which means "with" or "together with," and the noun *chronos* which means "time." When the word synchronic is applied to historical events, it describes occurrences that took place "together in time," or "at the same time." We will use the term synchronic to indicate how biblical theologians often explore sets of events in Old Testament history that happened at the same time.

To illustrate this idea, think about how movie directors tell their stories. Most popular movies convey the flow of a story from beginning to end. They depict how one event leads to another, and another, and so on. Yet, even though the movie is one, whole unit, it is also broken down into smaller parts called scenes. Each scene tells a portion of the larger story. In this sense, each scene represents a synchronic moment in the movie, a period of time in the film.

A synchronic study of the Old Testament takes a very similar approach. In synchronic synthesis, biblical theologians concentrate their attention on particular periods of time in the Old Testament as if they were scenes in a movie rather than on the flow of its entire history.

Still, it's important to realize that like scenes in a movie, synchronic approaches can focus on periods of various lengths. Sometimes biblical theologians focus on relatively brief historical moments, but other times they concern themselves with relatively long periods of time.

We do the same kind of thing in ordinary life. Sometimes we speak of things as happening at the same time, even though they actually take place over a stretch of time. For example, I might say, "I had a long talk with my friend just a moment ago," referring to a long conversation as a single event. At other times, we speak of larger temporal units as if everything occurred at the same time. For example, we might summarize the activities of a whole week by saying, "I spent last week in the mountains," or even of an entire year by saying, "I went to school last year." Biblical theologians exercise the same kind of temporal flexibility when they divide Old Testament history into synchronic units. Sometimes they focus on relatively short time frames and other times they focus on longer periods of history.

Now, unless we only have a split second in view, time passes in every synchronic period of history, and this passage of time introduces historical changes. Sometimes these changes are minor, but other times they can be rather significant. But no matter what changes take place, synchronic approaches to the Old Testament look at the period in

question as a whole. And they concentrate primarily on the theological perspectives that are established by the end of the time in view.

For instance, in the relatively short story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22, many things happen. But biblical theologians ask, "What theological outlooks characterized this part of Abraham's life?"

Biblical theologians also deal with larger periods of time, like Abraham's life in Genesis 11–25 — a time that spanned around 175 years. Even when such a large span of time is in view, they still ask questions like: "What theological perspectives appeared in Abraham's life as a whole?"

In fact, biblical theologians sometimes treat the whole Old Testament as a synchronic unit and ask: "What did God do and say in the days of the Old Testament?"

Having looked at the definition of "synchronic", we should turn to our second term, the word "synthesis."

SYNTHESIS

The concept of synthesis is not difficult to grasp. We use it often in daily life. Basically, it simply means combining different components of something into a whole.

For instance, imagine you go to a friend's house for dinner. You eat this and that. You hear someone speak and another person respond. Someone tells a joke and the group laughs. Someone comes late, another leaves early. All kinds of things take place. Now imagine that the next day you tell a friend what happened at the dinner. It's unlikely that you would simply try to repeat everything that took place. Instead, you would synthesize, or make sense out of the entire gathering.

In many respects, this is what we do when we look at the Scriptures with synchronic synthesis in mind. We describe the ways different components of theology revealed in a particular period of history fit together in a coherent, logical structure. To grasp how synchronic synthesis involves assessing the logical structure of Old Testament theology in a particular time, we'll touch on two issues. First, we'll look at a popular denial of the Old Testament's logical character; and second, we'll offer an affirmation of its logical coherence. Let's begin with a common denial of the Old Testament's logical character.

Denial

In the middle of the 20th century, many critical scholars distinguished biblical theology from systematic theology by pointing out the role of logic in each discipline. It is easy to see that logic has a vital function in traditional systematic theology. But critical theologians argued that logic should not play such a major role in biblical theology.

While the intricacies of these discussions go far beyond this lesson, we can still summarize their position in a helpful way. In essence, critical theologians believed that logic was a primary feature of what they called the "Greek mindset," but it was relatively foreign to the "Hebrew mindset." Based on a number of linguistic and cultural assessments, they argued that the Greeks focused on abstraction and logical order, much

like systematic theology. And by contrast, they suggested that the Hebrew mindset looked at everything in terms of historical dynamics. From this point of view, the Old Testament did not focus on logical systems or on theological relationships between beliefs. And for this reason, to synthesize Old Testament theology was to misread the Hebrew Bible and to force it into a Greek framework.

Affirmation

In distinction from this denial, an affirmation of the logical character of the Old Testament stands on at least two grounds. In the first place, recent studies have largely discredited the kinds of contrasts between Greek and Hebrew mindsets once suggested by many biblical theologians. These mindsets were different in many ways, but they were also very similar to each other.

In the second place, Old Testament theology displays substantial concern for logic and rational thought. No substantial way of looking at life is free from careful logical reflection. Now, without a doubt, many things revealed in the Old Testament will remain mysterious to human beings since God's thoughts are far beyond ours. Yet, this fact does not negate the value of thinking logically about what he has revealed to us. It is not a question of *if* Old Testament theology involved logic; it's only a question of *how* it did.

It's true that Old Testament theology does not employ the standards of formal western philosophical traditions that so deeply influenced traditional systematic theology. For instance, the Old Testament uses relatively few consistent technical terms; its theology is expressed in a variety of genres; different Old Testament authors emphasized different aspects of their faith; and nowhere does the Old Testament present an all-encompassing logical system of theology.

Even so, God's revelations in Scripture were not random, disconnected or contradictory. As we will see later in this lesson, God's revelations not only gave his people insight into particular events but also led them toward logical, synthetic ways of understanding, behaving, and feeling about him, themselves and the rest of creation.

With this basic idea of synchronic synthesis in mind, it will help to see an example of this approach in the Bible itself.

Example

As we look at the Scriptures, we find that characters and writers often divided the Old Testament into different historical periods and synthesized the theology they found there. They did this countless times, but for our purposes we'll simply point to one representative passage. Listen to what Paul wrote in Romans 5:12-14.

> **Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned — for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by**

breaking a command, as Adam did, who was a pattern of the one to come (Romans 5:12-14).

In these verses, Paul treated the time stretching from Adam's fall into sin to the giving of the law at Mount Sinai as one synchronic unit, a single period in history. His main concern in this passage was to prove how the far-reaching effects of Adam's sin foreshadowed the far-reaching effects of Christ's obedience. And to make this point, Paul synthesized several theological features of the time between Adam and Moses.

In verse 12, Paul mentioned that "sin entered the world through one man and death through sin." Here, he alluded to Genesis 3:14-19, where human death resulted from human sin. Next, Paul described the period between Adam's fall and Mount Sinai as a time "before the law was given," a time when people did not have codified laws like the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant. He also said that during this time people "did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam." That is to say, they did not violate specifically formulated directives from God like Adam had in the Garden of Eden.

Now, once Paul stated that there was no "law" before Mount Sinai, he had to deal with a hypothetical possibility: Maybe the people between Adam and Moses were innocent of sin. If they had no specific laws to violate, how can we be sure they were sinners? To answer this question, Paul pointed to another feature of that time: "death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses." His argument was that if men and women were under the curse of death, then by logical inference they must have been sinners.

In the larger context of this passage Paul also went on to say that Jesus' obedience to God solved the problem created by Adam's sin. Just as the single act of Adam's disobedience brought death to everyone joined to Adam, Christ's single act of obedience brought life to everyone joined to Christ. And for this reason, he said that Adam was "a pattern" or type of Jesus.

Notice how Paul's argument worked here. First, he synchronized the time from the Fall to the giving of the Law into one period, and the time from Christ through the present into another period. Second, he synthesized each period by tying some of its different features together in a logical fashion. In short, he did the same thing that responsible biblical theologians do. And his model means that synchronic synthesis is also a legitimate practice for modern Christians.

Now that we have seen what synchronic synthesis is, and shown that the New Testament legitimizes this approach, we are ready to turn to an essential step toward creating synchronic syntheses, the process of discerning historical information in the Old Testament.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

As we saw in the previous lesson, biblical theologians are particularly concerned with two types of historical events: divine act revelations, that is, things that God did; and divine word revelations, the things that God and his messengers said.

Before biblical theologians can synthesize the theology of a period in the Old Testament, they must first gather information about the historical events — the acts and words of God that occurred at the time they have in view. These historical facts become the basic building blocks of their synchronic synthesis. Now at first glance, this might seem like a rather easy thing to do. We might think that we only need to repeat what the Bible says happened at particular times. But as we will see, gathering historical information from the Bible requires great care.

The Old Testament does not come to us as a catalog of historical information. Rather, it contains narratives, poetry, law, wisdom writings, genealogies, different types of Psalms, prophetic speeches, and many other genres. All of these genres reveal information about God's acts and words, but this historical information is wrapped in each genre's literary features. And for this reason, biblical theologians have to find ways to gather historical information from each type of literature.

Time will only allow us to explore this process with two major types of literature: poetry and narratives. But what we learn about these genres will alert us to the kinds of concerns that apply to other genres as well. Let's begin with the ways poetry communicates historical information.

POETRY

When we speak of Old Testament poetry we have in mind passages like the Psalms, some wisdom literature, much of Old Testament prophecy and smaller portions of other books as well. To discern facts about God's actions and words from these Scriptures, we have to account for how the literary features of poetry reveal historical information.

To look into these matters, we will touch on two issues. First, we'll look at the two worlds that Old Testament poetry always considered. And second, we will see how concern for these two worlds affects the process of discerning historical information in poetry. Let's look first at the two worlds of Old Testament poetry.

Two Worlds

Poets of the Old Testament were interested in two different worlds that tell us about history. On the one hand, they gave attention to the world they wrote about — what we will call "that world." When writing about that world, they provided objective facts about God's acts and words. In the first place, poetry often opened windows to the past.

For example, one well-known poetical passage is the song that Moses and Miriam sang at the Red Sea in Exodus 15:1-21. Moses included this poetry in the book of Exodus in part to give his readers historical information about what God had done at the Red Sea.

In the second place, Old Testament poetry often provided windows to contemporary historical information from the writer's own time. For example, Psalm 1 recommends meditation on the law of God. To express the importance of God's law, the psalmist drew attention to patterns of God's ongoing blessings for faithful servants and

his judgments against sinners. In this sense, Psalm 1 gave its readers insight into current events of that time.

In the third place, at times Old Testament poets turned their readers' attention toward the future. For instance, in Isaiah 40:1-11, Isaiah predicted a time when the exiles of Judah would return to their land.

In one way or another, Old Testament poetry often conveyed information about the revelatory acts and words of God in the past, present and future. Old Testament poets also focused on the world of their readers, which we will call "their world." They focused on their world by designing their texts to influence the lives of their original readers in particular ways.

For example, the song of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15 encouraged Moses' early readers to move forward with confidence toward the Promised Land. Psalm 1 was written to inspire constant meditation on God's law. And the predictions of Isaiah 40 were designed to encourage those facing exile to maintain hope for a glorious return to the Promised Land. Old Testament poets drew their original readers' attention to "that world" of God's act and word revelations in order to speak to "their world," the times in which their early readers lived.

Now we should explore how the two worlds of Old Testament poetry affect the ways we can discern historical information from these portions of the Bible.

Discerning Information

We can be confident that what Old Testament poets told their readers about the past, present and future was true. They were inspired by God who only speaks truth. But they often described history in ways that were something other than straightforward. And for this reason, to know what poets actually intended to communicate about objective historical facts, we have to understand the literary conventions of Old Testament poetry.

There are many ways to describe the literary conventions of Old Testament poetry, but for our purposes we will note just four prominent features. First, poetical passages employ unusual vocabulary and syntax designed to make readers ponder what is written. Second, Old Testament poets used many figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, analogies, and hyperboles to describe historical realities indirectly. Third, poets expressed their own imaginative reflections to incite compelling imaginative sensory experiences in their readers. Fourth, they conveyed their own emotions to stir emotional reactions in their readers. These characteristics appear to some extent in other biblical genres as well, but they were concentrated, central features in Old Testament poetry.

To see how these characteristics affected the communication of historical information, we will look at a portion of one poetical passage we have already mentioned: the Song of Moses and Miriam at the Red Sea in Exodus 15. Listen to what Moses wrote in Exodus 15:6-7:

> **Your right hand, O Lord,**
> **was majestic in power.**
> **Your right hand, O Lord,**
> **shattered the enemy.**

In the greatness of your majesty
you threw down those who opposed you.
You unleashed your burning anger;
it consumed them like stubble. (Exodus 15:6-7)

As we have seen, in this passage Moses referred to the historical event of Israel's crossing of the Red Sea. Yet, these verses do not give a wooden description of what God did. For example, God's right hand was not actually visible at the Red Sea, even though Moses said that God's "right hand shattered the enemy." And the Egyptians were not burned by fire, even though God's "burning anger … consumed them like stubble." Instead, the narrative account in Exodus tells us that God sent a mighty east wind that separated the waters of the sea allowing the Israelites to pass on dry land. Then God drowned the pursuing Egyptian army by causing the waters to return as the Egyptians crossed.

So, why did Moses speak of God's right hand, and of his burning anger consuming the Egyptians like stubble? Moses relied on the common Old Testament metaphor of God's right hand to characterize this event as God's mighty attack against his enemies. He employed an exaggerated simile likening the Egyptians' condition to burned stubble; not to reveal the *means* of their destruction, but to reveal how *thoroughly and horribly* they were destroyed. Moses also wanted to incite imaginative experiences of the event in the minds and hearts of his readers. He expressed his own enthusiastic praise for God and he inspired others to do the same. Moses intended his poetry to be taken as a true record of the event, but he never meant it to be read as a literal, wooden description.

When we acknowledge the poetical features of Exodus 15:6-7, we can discern its historical information with relative ease. We might summarize these verses in a variety of ways depending on the aspect of the text that is our focus. For example if we were to focus on the way it uses figures of speech to relate historical data, we might summarize it in this way: "God set Israel free by miraculously destroying the Egyptian army in the Red Sea."

This example makes it clear that we must approach Old Testament poetry with care. We must not read it the same way we read prose. Instead, we must distill historical information by recognizing poetry's unusual vocabulary and syntax, its figures of speech, its imaginative concerns and its emotional impacts. Only then can we derive more realistic understandings of God's acts and words that contribute to our synchronic syntheses of Old Testament theology.

Now that we have touched on some of the ways we can discern historical information in poetry, we should turn to the genre of Old Testament narrative.

NARRATIVE

We are all familiar with Old Testament narratives. Books like Genesis, Exodus and many others are comprised largely of narratives; true stories about historical people, places and events. Biblical theologians often draw heavily from narratives because their stories reveal many details about history. They report words and speeches, names of characters, places where events occurred, and various historical connections. These and

other features make narratives rich resources for synchronic synthesis. But discerning historical information requires careful interpretation even of narratives.

We will look at narratives in the same way we discussed poetry. First, we'll see that narratives were also designed to provide information about two worlds. And second, we'll examine how to discern historical information in this genre. Let's look first at the ways these portions of the Bible record historical information about two worlds.

Two Worlds

Much like poets, the authors of narratives also stood between two worlds. On the one side, they wrote about the world that was the subject of their text, or "that world." Unlike poetry, however, narratives largely focus on the past, and only rarely mention the present or the future. For instance, Moses wrote about the primeval and patriarchal history in the book of Genesis, even though he lived much later in history. Old Testament authors often wrote about times that preceded the days in which they lived by hundreds of years.

On the other side, authors of narratives also dealt with "their world," the world in which their readers lived. They wanted their readers to think, act and feel in certain ways within their own worlds in the light of past events. So as Moses wrote about the primeval and patriarchal periods, he described those ancient days in ways that taught his Israelite readers about their *own* privileges and responsibilities. All authors of Old Testament narratives wrote about the past for the sake of their readers living in later times.

Old Testament narratives were designed to have many different influences. They were doxological, leading readers to praise and worship God. They were theological, explaining truths about God. Some were political, focusing on current national events as well as polemical, opposing false teachings. They were moral, explaining how God's people should live. They were motivational, encouraging every kind of faithful response.

In short, Old Testament narratives were *didactic*. They were designed to *teach* early readers about their lives. Now, in the narrative genre most of this didactic purpose was implicit; authors expected their readers to infer theological principles from their stories. Even so, this didactic aspect was very intentional. Authors always wrote in order to teach their readers about their own lives.

With these two worlds in mind, we should turn to the ways we can discern historical information from Old Testament narratives.

Discerning Information

Unfortunately, modern evangelicals often make the mistake of expecting Old Testament narratives to be like modern journalistic historical writings. Since the 17th century Enlightenment in Europe, many historians have sought to apply the standards of scientific rigor to written historical accounts. In this view, historians must seek to be as exacting as their counterparts in sciences like chemistry and biology.

There are many ways to summarize these rigorous standards, but we may say that in this outlook, trustworthy historical accounts must be comprehensive, precise and objective. That is to say, true historical records will include every significant fact about a situation to give a balanced account. They will report details with exacting precision, or will at least acknowledge that they haven't. And they will avoid all subjective evaluations that may prejudice readers.

Now we can understand why these modern ideals developed. After all, it's far too easy to confuse fact with fiction when historians do not reach for these standards to some extent. Yet, the authors of Old Testament narratives did not completely follow these modern ideals. Now, they did not propagate religious fantasies. Nor did they present historical errors or fabrications as fact. But they did write in ways that were determined largely by their didactic purposes, and not by our modern sensibilities.

To see how this is true, let's look briefly at the three modern standards that are often mistakenly applied to Old Testament narratives, beginning with the idea that historical accounts should be comprehensive. Simply put, Old Testament stories were only as comprehensive as suited the didactic purposes of their writers. They did not include every significant fact.

Consider an example from the book of Chronicles. When the writer of Chronicles composed his history of Solomon's life in 2 Chronicles 1–9, he followed the record of 1 Kings 1–11 fairly closely. But he omitted every negative dimension of Solomon's reign. He omitted references to Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter and other foreign women, his creation of worship centers for their gods at the temple, and the severe prophetic condemnation Solomon received.

By practically any measure, these negative events were highly significant. After all, according to 1 Kings 11:11-13, Solomon's failures led to the division of the nation. But the Chronicler determined not to include them because of his didactic purposes. To be sure, many of his readers already knew this information, but the Chronicler wanted them to concentrate on Solomon's positive accomplishments. And as a result, he focused his account on Solomon's successes. Old Testament authors felt no compulsion to include every significant fact. They did not meet the modern criterion of comprehensiveness in good history writing. Nevertheless, their narratives are true and authoritative records of the past.

In the second place, Old Testament authors were only as precise as their didactic purposes required. There is a vital difference between precision and truth. Every day of our lives we speak of things imprecisely without misrepresenting the truth. When someone asks, "What time is it?" We don't hesitate to say, "It's two o'clock," when it might be more precisely, two minutes and twenty seconds after two o'clock. In every aspect of life, precision is always a matter of degree. And so long as we respond with as much precision as is needed, no one accuses us of misrepresenting the facts. Well, in many ways, the same kind of thing was true for Old Testament authors. They were only as precise as they needed to be to reach their didactic goals. Consider for example Genesis 1:7, where Moses wrote about earth's atmosphere in this way:

> **So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it (Genesis 1:7).**

Here Moses wrote that God placed "the expanse" in the sky, using the Hebrew word *raqia.* The term *raqia* meant some sort of flattened solid material. As this passage tells us, this solid material separated "the water under the expanse from the water above it."

As modern people we know that Moses' description of earth's atmosphere is scientifically imprecise. Moses spoke this way because the sky appeared to him and to many others to be like a ceiling or tent of blue crystal or lapis lazuli. It was commonly held that rain resulted from the blue waters above pouring through holes or chimneys in this solid ceiling. Of course, the omniscient God of Scripture could have revealed to Moses a more scientifically precise understanding of earth's atmosphere if had he wanted to. But this was not what the Holy Spirit wanted his people to learn. Moses did not misrepresent the true condition of nature. But he did speak of it imprecisely as it appeared to him.

Knowing this, we have to be careful not to over-estimate the level of precision Moses intended to reach in Genesis 1:7. We would be mistaken to conclude that it was a historical fact that "God put a solid barrier in the sky" or that "God placed waters above and below a solid barrier." Instead, our assessment of this historical record must acknowledge Moses' imprecision and focus on his didactic purpose. For instance, we may rightly say from Genesis 1:7 that "God ordered the sky;" that "God established the sky to make earth habitable;" and that "God ordered the sky in a way that was good." Responsible interpretation must acknowledge the fact that Moses and other biblical authors spoke of historical facts with only enough precision to meet their didactic goals.

The question of precision also moves to the foreground when we consider reports of words and thoughts in Old Testament narratives. Consider just one example. In 1 Kings 9:5 and 2 Chronicles 7:18, we find a description of God's words in response to Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple. Let's compare these passages. In 1 Kings 9:5 we read these words from God:

> **I will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever, just as I spoke to David your father saying, "A man of yours will not be cut off from the throne of Israel." (1 Kings 9:5, literal).**

In 2 Chronicles 7:18 we read these words from God:

> **I will establish the throne of your kingdom just as I covenanted with David your father saying, "A man of yours will rule over Israel." (2 Chronicles 7:18, literal).**

Now, the larger contexts of these two verses make it clear that they refer to the same historical event, but the wording is not precisely the same. In 1 Kings, God "*spoke* to David," but in 2 Chronicles, he "*covenanted* with David". And in 1 Kings, God said, "A man of yours will not be cut off from the throne of Israel," while in 2 Chronicles, he said, "A man of yours will *rule* over Israel." Some of these differences may be the results of errors in textual transmission, but not all of them. Rather, they reflect the fact that Old Testament narratives were not designed to repeat words and thoughts of God or anyone else with absolute precision.

In reality, neither the writer of Kings nor the author of Chronicles intended to be utterly precise. What they wrote was historically true. They did not misrepresent what God said. But their levels of precision were determined by their didactic goals, not by modern notions of precise record-keeping.

Responsible interpretation distills what God said with levels of precision that match the biblical records. We can be confident that "God said he would establish David's dynasty" and that "God promised to uphold his covenant with David." And that "a descendant of David will always rule over Israel." But seeking much more precision than this would be misguided.

As we explore the genre of narrative in synchronic synthesis, we face many different kinds of imprecision. Numbers of people, measurements, geographical references and the like often do not meet modern scientific standards. But this lack of modern precision does not mean the accounts are untrue. On the contrary, we can be confident that Old Testament stories tell us the truth about history. Yet, we must always be careful not to overestimate their precision.

Finally, let's consider the fact that Old Testament narratives are not objective by modern standards. It's common in our day to think that reliable historical writers remain objective in their reporting, never allowing their presentations of history to reflect their personal opinions or evaluations of events. But we must always remember that objectivity is a matter of degree. As long as historical records have been kept, there have always been historians who allowed their subjective opinions to skew their writing to the point that they actually misrepresented history. But even the most objective historians had biases that they could not escape. At the very least, these biases influenced which events they reported and how they described them. In this sense, we know that historical writings have never been entirely objective.

This is even true when it comes to the Old Testament. God inspired Old Testament authors to shape the opinions of their readers. This goal influenced what they omitted, what they included, and how they described what they included. At times, it even moved them to express their biases and assessments boldly. For example, listen to these words from Genesis 13:13, where Moses reported that Lot pitched his tents near Sodom:

> **Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord (Genesis 13:13).**

We should not shy away from Moses' evaluation of Sodom. He gave his opinion on the city, but his moral outlook was inspired by God and therefore correct. We should feel free to say things like, "Lot turned from God to associate with wicked men," or, "The city of Sodom was full of wicked people." These statements represent objective truths about the historical conditions of that day.

In summary, we can say with confidence that Old Testament narratives were not designed to meet modern standards of history writing. They only present fully reliable historical information that will enable us to construct synchronic syntheses of Old Testament theology.

Having seen some of the ways we can discern historical information in the Old Testament, we can now give attention to our final topic: synthetic theological structures.

In this portion of our lesson, we'll focus on the ways God's revelations in different periods of Old Testament history formed synthetic, logically coherent theological structures.

SYNTHETIC STRUCTURES

When we speak of synthetic theological structures, we mean that divine revelations fit together so that they form coherent or logical perspectives on theological issues. Now, this is not to say that human beings ever comprehensively understand the logical connections among all the things that God revealed. It is rather that God's revelations were not isolated from each other, nor were they logically incompatible with each other. When viewed properly, they form logical patterns of belief or what we are calling synthetic, theological structures.

We will look at this subject in two main ways. First, we will touch on the variety of sources from which we must draw to discern these synthetic theological structures in the Old Testament. And second, we will see that these theological structures appear on a variety of levels. Let's consider first the different sources we must keep in mind.

VARIETY OF SOURCES

As we explore the variety of sources from which we discern theological structures, we'll first consider biblical revelations, and second we'll look at extra-biblical revelations. Whenever we interpret any Scripture, we must be ready to use every resource available. But it helps to think in terms of these two basic categories of resources. Let's turn first to biblical revelations that show us theological structures.

Biblical Revelations

The Scriptures are a central concern when we discern theological structures in any period of Old Testament history. But one question that often arises is this: "To which portions of Scripture should we look?"

For the sake of discussion, we'll divide this question into three types of biblical passages as they relate to a period of time in view: first, synchronic passages — portions of Scripture that deal with the historical period under consideration; second, antecedent passages — portions of the Bible that deal with history prior to the period in view; and third, subsequent passages — portions of Scripture that deal with revelation from later periods of time. Consider first how synchronic biblical passages help us discern theological structures.

When we speak of synchronic passages in this context, we do not mean passages that were *written* at the same time, but passages that *describe* the *same period of time*. On occasion, information about the theology of a period appears in only one passage of

Scripture. But most of the time, periods of Old Testament history are described in more than just one place. When this is the case, we need to combine all the information Scripture provides.

Since we believe that the Scriptures are inspired by God, we affirm the harmony of all its parts. We hold that every biblical comment on the history and theology of a period is true and fits coherently with everything else we know about that period. Biblical authors do not contradict each other; rather, they complement each other harmoniously. So, we must not limit ourselves to just one passage; we must be ready to draw from many synchronic portions of the Bible to determine what God did and said in particular historical periods.

In addition to synchronic passages, there are many times when we must also draw from antecedent sections of the Bible. Here we're not thinking about portions of the Bible that were written before others, but passages that focus on earlier periods of Old Testament history. What God did and said at earlier times often sheds light on the theological structures of later times.

For example, in Genesis 12:1-3 God offered Abraham innumerable descendants and the inheritance of the Promised Land. These words from God appear over and over in the chapters of Genesis devoted to Abraham's life, and they are critical to understanding the theological structures of his lifetime. Yet, there is no explicit explanation of their prominence during Abraham's life. This issue can be answered best by biblical passages dealing with antecedent or earlier periods of time.

For instance, in Genesis 1:28 God commanded his images, Adam and Eve, to multiply and have dominion over the entire earth. This numerical and geographical expansion of God's image over the earth has always been essential to God's purposes for the human race. Later, when Moses wrote about Abraham, he built on this earlier theological structure. Simply put, God focused on Abraham's descendants and land because he had chosen Abraham and his descendants to carry on Adam's original commission. The multiplication of Abraham's descendants and their possession of the Promised Land would be the starting point for the eventual dominion of humanity over the entire world.

Time and again we find that Old Testament records do not explain many theological viewpoints because they depended on what God had already revealed in earlier periods of time. For this reason, we must always make ourselves aware of antecedent revelations as we study the theological structures of a particular portion of history.

Besides synchronic and antecedent Scriptures, subsequent or later passages also help us discern theological structures. As with other types of passages, subsequent passages are not those that were necessarily written later. Rather, they are Scriptures that deal with later periods of history. For example, listen to God's word to Abraham in Genesis 12:3:

> **I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:3).**

In the second half of this verse, Abraham was clearly called to be the conduit through whom God would bless the whole world. But many have puzzled over the first half of

this verse. What did God mean when he said that this worldwide blessing would come through a twofold process of God blessing those who blessed Abraham and cursing those who cursed him? One way to understand this is to look at subsequent biblical revelation. Listen, for instance, to the words of Psalm 72:17:

> **May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed (Psalm 72:17).**

Psalm 72 was written in the days of Solomon, about a thousand years after the time of Abraham. And when it speaks of the one whose name may "endure forever," it is referring to the great son of David, the Messiah who will conquer, rule over and receive the treasures of all nations. This verse is a subsequent revelation to Genesis 12 because it refers to royal themes that were true of Solomon's later historical period. But it also tells us something about the theological structures during Abraham's day. Specifically, it alludes to God's earlier offer to Abraham when it says that "all nations will be blessed through him, and they will all call him blessed." But what does it tell us about the way that God's offer to Abraham would be fulfilled?

The surrounding verses of Psalm 72 indicate that the blessings of Abraham would spread to the world through warfare. As the Messiah defeated wicked nations and protected the righteous among the nations, those who stood with Abraham's royal descendant would be blessed, and those who opposed him would be cursed. And ultimately, all the families of the earth would be blessed through this process.

This insight is confirmed by the fact that so many stories about Abraham report the patriarch's positive and negative interactions with other groups of people. God revealed to Abraham that his blessing to all nations would come through a process of conflict in which God would bless some and destroy others.

As this example illustrates, earlier theological structures were often not mentioned or were left obscure until later revelation clarified them. In these cases, subsequent biblical revelation can help us grasp the theological structures of earlier periods. And so we can see that we must be ready to draw from all chronological types of biblical revelation to gain a greater understanding of the theological structures of a particular period of Old Testament history.

Now we should turn to a second major source that enables us to see the theological structures that characterized periods of the Old Testament: extra-biblical revelation, God's revelation outside of Scripture.

Extra-biblical Sources

As we seek to understand the theological structures of a period in the Old Testament, it's important to remember that no biblical passage was written in a theological vacuum. Old Testament authors wrote their texts within a context of beliefs and theological structures that they shared with their characters as well as their readers. God has disclosed these theological frameworks through two kinds of extra-biblical

revelation. First, he disclosed them through general revelation, the revelation of God in all things; and second, he gave them through special revelations not found in Scripture.

Both the Old Testament and New Testament teach that from the very beginning, every person has learned at least some true theology through general revelation. Passages like Psalm 19 and Romans 1:18-21 indicate that God has clearly revealed his nature, his moral requirements and the consequences of sin to all people through all of creation. We can summarize the matter this way: despite the fact that sinful people often suppress what they know from general revelation, at some level they still understand enough true theology to make them responsible to comprehend God's special revelations.

Because of the reality of general revelation, Old Testament authors always assumed that historical characters in their stories and later readers of their stories all shared many true theological perspectives with them as the authors. They felt no need to explain certain things explicitly because many basic theological structures were already in place. Consider just one passage that is often misconstrued by modern theologians because they forget about general revelation.

For example, in Genesis 22:12 we read that God stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son with these words:

> **"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Genesis 22:12).**

Unfortunately, this passage is often misconstrued by contemporary theologians. Because the angel said, "Now I know that you fear God," a number of interpreters have suggested that Abraham believed that God did not know what he would do before this moment in the story. In other words, they hold that the theology during this period did not include belief in the omniscience of God.

But the biblical testimony concerning general revelation indicates quite the contrary. In Romans 1:20 Paul stated that all people know God's "invisible qualities," like his omniscience. Now of course, sinful people suppress this knowledge, and can misconstrue God's words to Abraham. But general revelation makes it clear that Moses' record of this moment in Abraham's life does not suggest that God was limited in his knowledge.

Time and again, general revelation is assumed by biblical writers. When Gentiles received messages from Israel's prophets, like Jonah and Daniel, they did not form their theological outlooks solely on the basis of the few things these prophets said explicitly. God's messengers spoke to these pagans with the confidence that they understood much about the true God of heaven and earth through general revelation. As we seek to grasp the theological structures that characterized the period of Old Testament history, we must always remember that there is much that remained unwritten because biblical authors assumed general revelation.

In addition to general revelation, a second extra-biblical source helps us understand the theological structures of a period in Old Testament history: extra-biblical *special* revelation.

The Old Testament indicates that God gave special revelations to particular people in dreams, visions, auditions, and the like. It goes without saying that many holy

people in Scripture received much special revelation for which there is no specific biblical evidence. Special revelations were even given to some people outside of Israel, like Melchizedek, and even Pharaoh in Joseph's day. At times, the Old Testament hints that these extra-biblical revelations had taken place, and were even well known by ancient people. For example, listen to God's words to Noah in Genesis 7:2:

> **You shall take with you of every clean animal by sevens, a male and his female; and of the animals that are not clean two, a male and his female (Genesis 7:2, NASB).**

In this passage, God commanded Noah to distinguish between clean and unclean animals when he took them onto the ark. But nowhere in Scripture do we have a record of God revealing to Noah which animals were clean and unclean. The best conclusion to draw is that God specially revealed to Noah or to some other person before him the distinctions between clean and unclean animals.

As we explore the theological structures that characterized a period of Old Testament history, we also need to be aware of indications that God might have given other special revelations of which we have no record. When we pay attention to these kinds of extra-biblical revelations, we are able to grasp more fully the coherent, synthetic structures of the historical period that we have in view.

Having seen some of the many sources that help us grasp theological structures of a period in the Old Testament, we should now turn to the different levels of theological structures we encounter.

VARIETY OF LEVELS

As we look for the synthetic, logical arrangements of Old Testament theology in particular periods of history, it soon becomes apparent that various levels of theological structures appear. They include a broad spectrum ranging from very simple structures to very elaborate structures.

To see how this is so, we'll look at three general levels of theological structures. First, we'll give attention to "basic-level" synthetic theological structures; second, we'll look at an example of "middle-level" synthetic theological structures. And third, we'll explore relatively "complex" synthetic theological structures. Let's turn our attention first to some of the basic logical arrangements that characterized the theology revealed in periods of Old Testament history.

Basic-Level Structures

The most basic theological structures appear in the logical connections and implications among specific acts and words of God. To see what we mean, we'll look at two issues. First, we'll explore some of the ways divine act and word revelations logically intersect. And second, we'll illustrate what we have in mind with a particular

passage. Let's think first about the kinds of logical intersections that exist among divine actions and words.

There are many ways God's specific revelations relate to each other. In the first place, God's acts often intersect with his words. As we saw in our previous lesson, God's words often preceded his actions in the form of predictions. At other times, God's words occurred nearly simultaneously with his actions and explained what he was doing. And at still other times, his words came after his acts and reflected on the significance of what God had done in the past.

At the same time, God's actions also shed light on his words. For instance, when God acted before he spoke, his actions often anticipated what he would say by preparing for his word to come. When God acted nearly simultaneously with his words, his actions often illuminated the meaning of his explanatory words. And of course, when God acted after he had spoken, he often did so to fulfill his previous words.

But in addition to this, basic theological structures appear in the ways God's actions logically intersect with his other actions. In these cases, logical coherence comes into view in a number of ways. To name just a few possibilities: sometimes one act of God was simply added to, or combined with another act; at other times, one thing that God did foreshadowed another action that he performed; acts of God prepared the setting for additional acts; and at times divine actions caused other acts to occur.

And beyond this, basic theological structures also appear as we see how God's word revelations logically intersect with other word revelations. Once again, the possible associations are innumerable. To name just a few, one word may simply have been added to another, one word may have been the logical basis for another, or one word may have explained another.

The various ways God's acts and words related to each other establish many logical arrangements. The intersections of God's specific actions and words formed countless, intricate webs of logical implications. These implications formed synthetic theological structures or coherent theological perspectives that God established at particular times in Old Testament history.

With this general idea in mind, it will help to illustrate how intersections of divine acts and words form coherent theological structures in a particular passage. Consider, for instance, a portion of the story of Eve's creation in Genesis 2:15-22. There we read these familiar words.

> **The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it… The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name... But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man (Genesis 2:15-22).**

Consider first some of the logical intersections between God's actions and words. The passage begins in verse 15 with God putting the man in the garden to take care of it. This act intersected with God's word in the first half of verse 18 when God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." At first blush, we might have thought that Adam's life in the Garden of Eden was grand, but God's word reflected on his previous action and noted that Adam's isolated existence was not good.

In a similar way, we also see that the words of the second half of verse 18, "I will make a helper suitable for him," predicted God's action of fulfillment in making the woman in verse 22. These logical connections between God's acts and words reveal a simple theological structure, a coherent set of beliefs that grew out of this period in history. God created human beings to tend his garden, but this task required both males and females.

God's various actions in this story also intersected with each other in ways that revealed synthetic theological structures. God had already formed animals in preparation for Adam to exercise authority by naming them in verse 19. Verse 20 tells us that Adam did not find a helper among the animals and this partly explained the purpose of Adam's interaction with the animals. These acts of God revealed a simple theological perspective, a logical way of looking at these things. God ordained men to rule over the animals, not to find their suitable helpers among them.

Finally, we can also see a logical intersection between two revelatory words in verse 18. On the one hand, God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." This statement is the reason for God then saying, "I will make a suitable helper for him." This logical connection reveals the coherent theological point of view that God's resolution for man's unacceptable solitary existence was the creation of a suitable helper. This simple example illustrates what we encounter time and again in the Old Testament. Synthetic theological structures, coherent theological perspectives, are revealed through the intersections of divine acts and words.

Now we should turn to middle-level theological structures that characterized periods of Old Testament history.

Middle-Level Structures

The significance of specific acts and words of God often becomes clearer when we give attention to synthetic theological structures that are of a middle or moderate complexity. As we just saw, single acts and words of God did not occur in isolation from each other. And the same was true of sets of his actions and words. They fit within other, more complex theological structures that characterized the period of history that we have in view.

There are many kinds of middle-level synthetic structures, but for our purposes we will focus on just one: divine covenants. First, we'll sketch the logical dynamics of covenants, and then we'll illustrate how this logical structure helps us grasp the theology of a period of history. Consider first the logical dynamics of covenants.

It has long been recognized that the faith of Old Testament Israel was covenantal. The concept of covenant permeates the Scriptures. Although there are many things we

might say about covenants, we'll simply look at one aspect of divine covenants in the Old Testament: how they help us understand the coherence of particular divine revelations.

Although each covenant in the Old Testament had unique features, they all exhibited a logical way of understanding three main elements: divine benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. The relationship between God and human beings was always governed by logical connections among these three elements. God showed benevolence in the ways he brought people into relationship with him and sustained them in that relationship. But in response, human beings were expected to show loyalty to God by keeping his commands. Additionally, each covenant in the Old Testament established consequences: blessings that would come to those who were obedient to the commands of God, and curses that would come to those who were disobedient.

It's very important to realize that every moment of Old Testament history was governed by these logical covenant structures. They formed, as it were, a template that helps us see the underlying organization of all of God's act and word revelations. At times, God's revelations demonstrated his covenantal benevolence, his kindness toward people. Other divine acts and words expressed God's expectation of human loyalty, the ways human beings were to respond to his benevolences. And divine revelations often drew attention to the consequences of blessings and curses as well. Our awareness of the structure of theology at any moment in the Old Testament rests to a large extent on the ways each feature of divine revelation fit within these covenantal structures.

To illustrate how this middle-level synthetic structure works, let's look further at the example of Eve's creation in Genesis 2. Now, as we know, Genesis 2 took place during the time of God's initial covenant with Adam. We will discuss the uniqueness of this covenant in our next lesson. At this point, however, we simply want to note some obvious ways the logical structures of divine benevolence, human loyalty, and the consequences of blessings and curses appear in this passage.

In the first place, God displayed amazing benevolence toward Adam when he first put Adam in his garden in Genesis 2:8. But notice also that God gave Adam the responsibility of loyalty. Adam was "to work ... and take care of" the garden. The covenant structures lying behind this verse are evident. God was kind to Adam, and in response Adam was to work and take care of the garden in loyal service to God.

In the second place, in verse 18 God showed more benevolence toward Adam when he acknowledged Adam's condition and said he would give Adam a suitable helper. Then in verses 19 and 20, Adam began to fulfill his responsibility of loyalty by naming the animals, and he rightly saw that no animal was suitable for him.

In the third place, in verses 21 and 22, we see the consequence of Adam's faithfulness in naming the animals and finding no suitable helper among the animals: God blessed Adam with the gift of Eve, his suitable helper. In this passage, there is no explicit threat of consequences of divine curses, but had Adam failed to fulfill his responsibility, we have every reason to believe that God would not have blessed him in these ways. This simple example illustrates how middle-level synthetic structures like covenants help us make sense of God's particular act and word revelations.

With these levels of synthetic structures in mind, we should turn our attention to complex-level synthetic structures.

Complex-Level Structures

When we speak of complex theological structures, we have in mind frameworks or systems of theology that are so far-reaching that they incorporate many basic and middle-level structures, and then combine them with other ideas as well. There are many complex theological systems in Old Testament theology, but we will focus our attention on one of the most prominent: what we will call the theology of the kingdom of God.

There is much we could say about this topic, but in this lesson, it will suffice for us simply to summarize the doctrine of the kingdom of God, and then to look at an example of how it helps us to see the theological structures of a segment of Old Testament history.

The doctrine of God's kingdom refers to God's all-encompassing plan for his creation. From Genesis to Revelation, we find that history is moving immutably toward the goal of God receiving honor and praise from all creatures by establishing his glorious reign on earth as it is now in heaven. All of Scripture makes it clear that God ordained his image, human beings, to serve this end by preparing the earth for his glorious kingdom.

Although God originally placed his image only within the holy Garden of Eden, human beings have always been called to extend the boundaries of God's garden to the ends of the earth by multiplying and having dominion in service to God. As we read in Genesis 1:28:

> **And God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28).**

After the fall into sin, human beings needed to be redeemed and empowered by God in order to carry out this task. Nevertheless, those whom God redeemed from sin were still called to expand God's kingdom by spreading his redemption and rule everywhere.

Sadly, time and again the Scriptures reveal that God's people failed in their mission, but God did not give up on his kingdom plan. His plan was ultimately fulfilled when the second person of the Trinity became a human being, when he lived a perfectly holy life, paid for the sins of God's people by dying on the cross, rose from the dead, and received his just reward when he ascended into heaven. From there, Jesus now reigns over all, and he will return in glory to make all things new. When Christ returns he will utterly eliminate evil from the earth and form the new heavens and new earth. And at that time, the earth will be filled with redeemed, holy images of God and God the Father will descend and fill all the earth with his glory. As we read in Revelation 21:9-23:

> **One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God … I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty**

> **and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp (Revelation 21:9-11, 22-23).**

Prior to this consummation of all things in the glorious return of Christ, God has called his redeemed people to take up the cause of spreading his kingdom. Every stride that Old Testament believers made toward this end was in service to God's great kingdom plan.

This biblical vision of God's kingdom coming to earth forms an all-embracing synthetic theological structure that helps us understand God's revelations in history. His kingdom plan lies in the background of everything he ever did and said in the Old Testament. God will be glorified by his image extending his reign to all the earth. This synthetic theological structure helps us understand the logical organization of all divine revelation in the Old Testament.

To see how this complex theological organization helps us understand particular portions of Old Testament history more clearly, consider once again the example of Eve's creation in Genesis 2. We have seen that God did and said many things that logically intersected in a variety of ways. We have also seen that the logical arrangement of covenant dynamics draws attention to the fact that God showed much benevolence to Adam, that he called Adam to loyalty, that Adam fulfilled some of his responsibilities, and that Adam was blessed when God created Eve as his suitable partner.

But as helpful as it is to see these theological structures, we are still left with an important question. Why did God do these things? What was his ultimate purpose? The answer to these questions is found in the theology of God's kingdom.

As we have said, at the very beginning in Genesis 1, God gave a special role to humanity in his world. As his image, humanity was called to be the righteous instrument by which God's paradise or kingdom would spread throughout the world. But Adam could not fulfill his kingdom mission by himself. A solitary man could not multiply and take dominion over the whole earth. So, God blessed Adam further with a suitable helper who would enable him to fulfill his role in God's kingdom. With Eve at Adam's side, the image of God would be able to multiply, and to move forward in great numbers to prepare the earth for God's glorious reign. When we view the creation of Eve against the backdrop of this complex theological structure, we can see that her creation was an important step toward turning the whole world into the kingdom of God.

So we see that periods of Old Testament history reflect synthetic theological structures on many levels. On a basic level, we notice how acts and words of God intersect with each other. As we enlarge our view to the middle range of structures like divine covenants, we can see how sets of God's revelations fit within the logic of larger theological arrangements. And as we apply even larger synthetic structures, like the kingdom of God, we find that the coherence of divine revelation becomes even clearer.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've explored how biblical theologians form synchronic syntheses of Old Testament theology. We noted that synchronic synthesis is the description of

God's act and word revelations during particular times in Old Testament history. We also looked at the ways historical information can be acquired from different genres in the Old Testament. And we saw how to discern the synthetic theological structures of God's revelation on a variety of levels during a period of history.

Forming synchronic syntheses of Old Testament theology is a vital dimension of biblical theology. As we understand what God revealed through his acts and words during particular periods of Old Testament history, we will be better prepared to explore how theology developed through the entire Bible.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is Co-Founder and President of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including *Pray with Your Eyes Open, Every Thought Captive, Designed for Dignity, He Gave Us Stories, Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles* and *Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*.

Building Biblical Theology

LESSON TWO

Synchronic Synthesis in the Old Testament

Faculty Forum

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Contents

Building Biblical Theology

Lesson Two: Synchronic Synthesis in the Old Testament

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Jean Mondé
Rob Griffith

Question 1:
What does the term "synchronic" mean when it's applied to the Bible?

Student: Now, Richard, before I watched the lessons, I had never heard the word synchronic being used before in dealing with the Bible. Can you explain that term to us a little bit more?

Dr. Pratt: The word synchronic is not a common word, that's for sure, but we do use words that are associated with it that are common like synchronize, you know, we synchronize our watches. That means we make them at the same time. And that's really all it basically means. When you say synchronic, or synchrony is the noun, or synchronized, we could even put it that way. And so synchronic, we just say synchronized synthesis. We could have said that, but the term that theologians like to use is synchronic. But basically all it means is: at the same time. The idea, of course, is that in biblical theology, especially with the emphasis of Geerhardus Vos, the thing that connects everything in the Bible is history. It's the flow of time. But the flow of time is so complex and so long when you're dealing with the Bible that you really have to, as it were, chop it up. And this is what biblical theologians do, especially in the Old Testament as we're talking about in this lesson. They chop the Old Testament up into periods of time or moments in time and deal with what's going on at that moment synchronically as if it were a time, an identifiable segment of time.

Now, let's just make the point that no matter how short a period of time is, there's something going on there, there's change going on. And so the opposite of synchronic is diachronic, through time. And so even if you have a period of time in the Old Testament, say, the length of day. Let's say you're going to talk about what happened the day that Abraham sacrificed Isaac, or prepared to sacrifice Isaac. That's just one day. But still, lots of things happened in that day. So there's development through that. There's a diachrony, a diachronic dimension to it. But in effect, what biblical theologians tend to do is, as they identify a period of time and deal with it synchronically, they minimize their attention to those changes and they more or less ask, what was the final state of this period? And that's an important question, because when you're thinking about say the Exodus from Egypt…Let's just say we want to talk about the Exodus from Egypt, and of course there's a lot in that. You can start with the birth of Moses. You could go all the way through his call at the burning bush;

you could go through the plagues that came on Egypt. You could go through the crossing of the Red Sea. Maybe you stop there, or maybe you stop at Mt. Sinai. So, all of this is developmental. All of it is one thing happening after another after another, and at each one of those steps, God is revealing more of himself in his actions, and he's revealing more of himself in his words.

And so a biblical theologian has to in some respects minimize those changes if he's going to talk about the Exodus as a period of time. And normally what that means is they take the last stage or the last moments of that period of time and, as it were, isolate it or freeze-frame it. So it's just the reality that because synchronic synthesis is artificial in this sense, you are in some respects removing yourself from the reality of what was actually going on in the biblical history.

Student: So as an example, let's go back to the time of the Exodus. Let's say we start with the birth of Moses and we end in Sinai. Would most biblical theologians then focus on the covenant with Moses as opposed to God speaking in the burning bush because it was later? Is that right?

Dr. Pratt: Yes. Right. And the tendency — and these are only tendencies, mind you — the tendency is to read the prior things of that period that you selected in the light of the last thing. These things are only leading up to it, and this reflects back on all those things. So that's just the tendency, the natural tendency. But here the great news is that if you don't do this sort of artificial dividing up of the Bible, then what you end up with is such a complicated thing you can never say anything about the Bible. And I think we use in this lesson the illustration of instructions for putting together a desk, or something like that, and the fact that it breaks it down into steps is a good thing. And that's what biblical theologians are doing. It's an important piece, but it's always important to know that it's artificial, that God did not step out one day and say, "Okay, that periods over. Now we're going to this period." Boom! In a nanosecond. That's not what happened. And so as you go through the synchronic process of identifying particular eras or particular periods of time, it's always important to realize that you're making something digital that's not actually digital. You're making something binary that's not actually binary. And this binary digital reality that you're creating is somewhat artificial, but nevertheless useful. And that shouldn't bother us because that's what we do every moment of every day. We treat things that are actually continuous as if they're separated or separate items just so we in our humanness, in a finitude, that we can manage them better.

Question 2:
What does the term "synthesis" mean when it's applied to the Bible?

Student: Okay, Richard, so you've explained the synchronic. Now explain the synthesis part.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, because the title of the lesson is synchronic synthesis. Synthesis is more different to define than synchronic. Let's just make that point — that is, if you squeeze it down and really get down on it. We normally in common day speech know what a synthesis is. It's sort of a summary. It's a way of putting the pieces together in a summary statement or a way of sort of including everything in it in some sort of package. It's making everything one. And that's what we mean when we say synthesis. So if we were to take the example of the exodus again that we talked about earlier, lots of things happened. But one way we could synthesize everything that God did and everything God said during that whole period, let's say from Moses' birth until the time at Mt. Sinai, is we could say this: God delivered Israel from Egypt so that they could possess Canaan, the Promised Land. Now that is a simple sentence. It doesn't say everything that goes on there, but it is built out of the relationships of all the many, many acts of God and words of God that are revealed during that period of time, and it brings them together in a logical or coherent package. Now of course this assumes that what God does in the world and what God says about the things that he does in the world are coherent. So that's the key here. If we were to take a Nietzschean approach to history and say that history is actually chaotic and has no reason behind it, it has no ultimate synthetic quality to it, then we would have to say, well, you can't do this. But from a biblical point of view, history happens as it happens because of God's plan for history, and it is a coherent plan. And I think that's an extremely important piece of the puzzle here.

Question 3:
How do the Hebrew and Greek mindsets relate to synchronic synthesis?

Student: You've also talked about the Hebrew mindset and the Greek mindset. What does that have to do with it?

Dr. Pratt: Well that's an important piece of this, because there were stages in biblical theology — and, unfortunately, they continue even in our day in evangelical circles — but these stages where this was emphasized were actually in critical biblical theology where people said that when you read the Bible you have to be careful not to try to make logical sense out of it, because that's not the way "Hebrews" thought about things. Now that whole view was utterly discredited by James Barr in his book The Semantics of Biblical Language. Just absolutely discredited. It's a good little book to read some time — actually, it was a big book and hard to read but was a good one to read — because he took biblical theologians, critical biblical theologians, to task on this. They argued basically that the Bible's view of God, or the Hebrew view of God is that he's dynamic and changing and doing things constantly, and that what he does is really not of concern when you're thinking logically. And so you have to look for contradictions and look for all kinds of things like that and accept them and receive them in. And so the process of synthesizing acts of God and words of God at a particular time really would be impossible.

Now Barr said that the distinction that was being made at that time between the Hebrew mindset and the Greek mindset was bogus. The Greek mindset everybody agreed was somehow all about logic, all about stability, all about permanent ideas that fit together in logical forms, and that kind of thing. And they rooted this difference between Greek mindset and Hebrew mindset in the language of Hebrew and in the Greek language. They actually went that far. They wanted to say that this was actually rooted in the languages themselves. And that's where James Barr went after them, because, to begin with, the mind does not think like language works. That's one thing, that's one big problem. But another big problem is that the languages don't work differently, they work the same. The notion was that Greek language is abstract, but the Hebrew language was dynamic and historical, and it is not concerned about logical connections, and the Greek language is all concerned about logical connections. But James Barr just showed that that was not the case.

Now the outcome of all of that is this: Greek people think logically and Greek people think historically and dynamically, and Hebrew people in the ancient world thought dynamically and historically, and Hebrew people in the ancient world thought logically as well. And one way you might put this is just because in Hebrew you say shalom to mean hello and goodbye, doesn't mean that you don't know the difference between hello and goodbye. Your language does not reflect your brainwork, your thoughts. It's called logico-grammatical isomorphism, which is one of the biggest mistakes people make with the Bible. So we mustn't be afraid of trying to understand the logical connections between words of God and acts of God in a particular period of time. We can make synthetic summaries of those things. They do make sense. To some degree we can make them make sense by applying just our reasonable capacities as we have as normal human beings, and then the Bible itself can help us see those logical connections or even theological connections among the acts of God and the words of God in a period of time. And this is what biblical theologians try to do. They try to describe what God has done and what God has said in a package so that they can summarize what he did in that period of time and then go on to the next step of biblical theology.

Question 4:
Does the Bible use synchronic synthesis?

Student: Can you give us some more examples of the Bible using synchronic synthesis?

Dr. Pratt: Yes, it's everywhere. Every time the Bible says anything about any time in the Bible, it's making a synchronic synthesis. Let's make that point first. Because even as it's telling a story, what it does is it summarizes what's going on out of all the manifold events that were taking place. So every single step of a story is a synthesis of what was happening that the writer wanted to pull together and say this is important and these are the ways these things connect, because we said in the other

lesson that every event is radial, yes? And all they're doing is summarizing even as they write stories. But there are more dramatic and more pertinent examples as well.

Take for example Matthew 19 when Jesus describes the issue, or deals with the issue of divorce. When the Pharisees come to him and say, "Why should people divorce?" And Jesus says, "Well, you shouldn't." And the way he does this is he says, "It was not so from the beginning." In other words, he's summarizing that divorce was not a part of the original creation order. And he actually quotes a passage — "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and the two small become one flesh." So what Jesus does is basically he summarizes everything from Genesis 1:1 all the way through until chapter 3 on the subject of marriage, and he synthesizes all the information that's there into a sentence or two, and that is a way in which he is characterizing then that whole period with regard to that subject. That is a synchronic synthesis. He doesn't go through every single moment of those days from Genesis 1:1 all the way through to chapter 3 to make his point. That would be next to unhelpful, I guess we could say, because that's what the Bible itself does. So to deal with the issues that he is dealing with, with the Pharisees, he makes a synchronic synthesis.

But then he makes another synchronic synthesis in that passage, because he says even though it wasn't that way from the beginning, the Pharisees say, well then why did Moses give us permission to divorce our wives in Deuteronomy. And so he does another synchronic synthesis by saying that, because your hearts are hardened. Now he's taken this huge period of time from the days of Moses all the way to the present day and he's making a synthetic statement about it. He's dealing with that as one period and he's making a synthetic statement about it, and that is: he gave you this law because your hearts are hard. That's what we mean when we say synthetic statements about periods of time in the Bible.

Another way in which the Bible synthesizes itself is the way it will summarize the rules of the Bible or the commands of the Bible. When Jesus was asked what exactly is the greatest of the commandments, and he says, of course, "Love God with all your heart, soul and mind," and then he says the second one, even though they didn't ask him, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Now what he's done now is he's taken Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 18, parts of the law of Moses, and he synthesizes them in this way with this statement: "All the law and the prophets hang on these two commands." In many respects, what he's done now is taken hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of laws and he synthesized them into a couple of sentences. And oddly enough, the apostle Paul actually says that the whole law is summed up in "love your neighbor". He even leaves out love God in that case. So every time you talk about anything theologically, you are synthesizing. And if you're selecting a period of time, either big or small period of time, you are taking the various elements of God's actions and God's words in that time and you're drawing some kind of conclusion from it that is synthetic. It's not as odd as it sounds at first. It does sound very peculiar, you know? Who does synchronic synthesis of the Bible? That sounds rather bizarre, but we have to put big words on it or it doesn't feel like it's a theological

class, right? And so synchronic simply means at one time, whether big or small, and synthesis means just putting the pieces together into a whole package.

Question 5:
How can we use the Bible to get information about a particular period of time?

Student: Now, Richard, in the video you talk about the difference between "that world" and "their world." Could you give us a contemporary example of how that may look?

Dr. Pratt: Let's back up and just talk about in general for a moment before we go to the contemporary world. The issue in this part of the lesson is if biblical theology is going to summarize what happens in a period of time, well, how do we get information from the Bible about what happened in a period of time? That's the basic question. And to do that, we have to realize that the Bible itself is not identical with what happened in the days that the Bible describes. And why is that? It's because the Bible is selective if nothing else.

Student: It can't say everything.

Dr. Pratt: You can't say everything that happens. You can't describe everything that happens in this room for the next 5 minutes without writing just endless pages of things. So Bible writers are very selective. You remember John closes his gospel by saying if we were to write everything that Jesus did, the world couldn't contain the books. So he's admitting that what he's saying about that world of history is limited. Now the question is, how do Bible writers, how do they decide what limited information they're going to give in their books or they're going to have in their books? And the answer to that in part is — of course under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit — is their world; that world is the real historical events that took place. The writers are being selective about that. And how do they decide what they're going to select? Well, they're interested not in just what happened back then, but they're interested in the people to whom they're writing. So they're going to write, they're going to select things about that world with the interest in mind of their audience — their world — and that is guiding them the whole time. It's just really important to grasp that that's the case.

In the most historically oriented parts of the Bible — the Gospels, the historical books of the Old Testament — we see it over and over again. Luke does not have all the things that Matthew has, and Matthew doesn't have all the things that John has. And that's because, even though they're talking about the same "that world," the life of Jesus, they're being very selective in what they choose to talk about in their books based upon their concerns of the people to whom they're writing — "their world." So

understanding that, Bible writers are not giving us just straight-up history, they're giving us interpreted history, at least at the bare minimum selective views of history.

We can think about movies. I mean, movies today do that kind of thing. Can you imagine? I mean, there have been, for example, many movies made about the life of John F. Kennedy, for example, President of the United States. There's several of them. But are they all correct? Are they all perfect? No, they're not all perfect. But let's just say they made no mistakes at all in any of those movies. Let's say they were all absolutely right on the dot. Now, let's say this, are they all saying exactly the same thing? Do they all include the same events? Do they describe those events in the same way? Even though they're about one "that world," JFK's life. And let's say they don't make any errors just for the hypothesis here, are those four hypothetical movies about John F. Kennedy's life, are they going to be the same? Do they have to be the same?

Student: Not necessarily.

Dr. Pratt: They can all say truth, right, about John F. Kennedy's life without being the same?

Student: And they're all going to be influenced in some way by whatever motives the writer holds. Is that what you're saying?

Dr. Pratt: That's right. And who is he trying to influence with his movie?

Student: His audience at that time.

Dr. Pratt: Okay, exactly. So you can imagine, can't you, that if somebody made a movie of John F. Kennedy's life let's say in 1969 near his death that the motivation of a film writer at that time, or a screenwriter and then the director of the film, would be different from somebody writing in 2009, 2020. And on it goes. And the reality is that people, when they write about history, or when they make movies about history, or they tell stories about history, if they're trying to be true to history, they're concerned with two worlds: the world of history and the world of their audience, and their world that they live that they share with their audience.

Question 6:
Did Bible writers manipulate history?

Student: Well, it sounds to me that Bible writers are making things up, in a way manipulating history. Wouldn't you say?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's a common reaction. As soon as you realize that John is different from Matthew, or you realize that Chronicles is different from Kings — and they are, they're very different from each other, dealing with the same "that world"

but different as they write to "their worlds" — the immediate response of course is, well, then the liberals are right. Bible writers are just making things up. Well, that's just not the case, necessarily, anyway. It's just simply not the case because all history writing is done this way. You cannot avoid it. No matter what you do in trying to be just telling exactly what happened, at a minimum, you're going to be selective about it. And what's going to guide you in your selection is what you think is important for your audience to get. Okay? And that's just fact. If you're writing a story about something for a twelve-year-old, you're going to be selecting different pieces than if you're writing for a fifty-year-old. If you're writing for people in North America, you're going to be having different pieces than if you're writing for people say in Latin America. This is just the way it works. This is the nature of life and history writing.

And Bible writers were doing the same thing under the inspiration of the Spirit so that they never told anything that was false, but they never said exactly the same thing. And you can tell that this is the case in every single portion of historical writing in the Bible. Take for example, the book of Genesis. One of the things that people always ask when they get to about the third, fourth, fifth chapter of Genesis is: Cain goes out and builds a city — chapter 4. Well, where did all the people come from that were in the city? I mean, I thought up to this point all we've heard about is Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, right? Not even any women for them to marry much less a whole city of people. Well, that's a modern question that we might want to raise with the Bible, but obviously it wasn't a question that Moses had. It wasn't an issue for him. And frankly, I don't think we know the answer. But why didn't he put that in there? Why didn't he explain how Cain could have a city? What do you think?

Student: It wasn't part of his purpose.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it just wasn't part of the information he cared to talk about. You know, that's just the way it is all through the Bible. The Bible has "lacunae," or blank spaces, compared to what we might want it to have. In other words, it fills in certain spaces historically that we might not even in our natural state be even interested in, but it says we should be interested in. And in other things we are interested in, it leaves out. And you cannot write history without doing that. You have eleven chapters in Genesis going from the creation of the universe to the life of Abraham around 2000 BC. Now that's eleven short chapters that you can read in about 45 minutes. Has anything been left out?

Student: A couple of things.

Dr. Pratt: A couple of things have been left out. So they are not making things up, they're simply being selective in what they talk about, and they are also being intentional in the ways they talk about it.

Question 7:
How similar is biblical history to modern journalism?

Student: Now let's talk about the analogy that you used between journalism and biblical history.

Dr. Pratt: That's important. I can't tell you how important it is, really, in some respects, because I think people often believe that the Bible was written according to the standards of — they're really abstract standards — of modern journalism. Contemporary journalism doesn't do this quite as badly as they used to maybe fifty years ago, or forty years ago. But it used to be told to people who were writing journalistic history like newspaper reporters and people like that, that they should meet at least three criteria. They were to be comprehensive in what they said, they were to be precise in what they said, and they were to be objective in what they said. Now you can actually go online and see that these are criteria that people actually put on reporters and put on historians. The thought was, you know, that history telling, history writing, should be much like other scientific endeavors. It was when people thought that the greatest thing in the universe was science, and science must be comprehensive, science must be precise, and science will be objective. The problem with that is that history writing is never, never, never those things. Not just Bible history, but I mean even the best of modern history is never completely comprehensive, never utterly precise, and never absolutely objective. Now let's unpack that for a minute, okay? Why can't history writing be comprehensive? Rob, why don't you think it could be comprehensive?

Student: There's too much. You cannot have everything.

Dr. Pratt: There's too much. That's right. I mean, if you have more than a nanosecond of history writing to cover, say, the history of this room in a nanosecond — which you couldn't do because it's too small — but if you have a five-minute period, there are so many things to talk about just around this table that happened in five minutes, you could not stop writing about it. You would either run into the problem of death or imagination being limited. You could not be comprehensive. Well, biblical writers were also not able to be comprehensive.

Now God is comprehensive. This is how we know that what little bit he tells us is true, it's because he knows everything. So we don't have to worry that what the Bible says is true just because it's not comprehensive. We illustrated earlier the fact that God doesn't tell us where Cain's friends came from that inhabited his city. Well, there are millions of issues like that in the Bible where the Bible is not comprehensive. Now God's comprehensive knowledge gives validity and gives stability to the little pieces that he does tell us, but we don't have God's understanding of things. We apprehend God, we apprehend his truth, we understand it but not comprehensively. And that would be true for Bible writers also. God can't say everything when he says anything, so long as God is talking to us. Why not?

Student: Because he's infinite and we're finite.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, and we wouldn't understand it. So every time God reveals himself to people, as Deuteronomy 29:29 says, there are plenty of things that are kept secret — "The things that are secret belong to the Lord, and the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children." So, only those things that are revealed. So the Bible history is not comprehensive. And so long as you want it to be, you're wanting the wrong thing.

Okay, now the second criterion is precise. I think most of us feel fairly comfortable with this idea that the Bible may not be comprehensive, telling us everything, but is it imprecise? There's another question. The issue here on precision is extremely important also, because there are Christians, and they're well-meaning, who believe that when the Bible describes anything, it's giving an utterly precise description of that thing, that event, or that word from God. And typically, such people are reading from an English Bible or their own native language Bible, and so they're convinced, for example, if you're an English speaker, that God spoke these words in English. Or that God spoke these words in Russian, or Spanish, whatever they're language may be. And the fact is, of course, that's not true. Nor did they speak these things in Hebrew exactly the way they are delivered to us in the Bible, nor did they say these things in Greek the way that they're delivered to us in the New Testament. I mean, we know what language Jesus spoke. What language did Jesus speak?

Students: Aramaic.

Dr. Pratt: Aramaic for the most part. I mean, if you saw the movie you'd know for certain that he spoke in Aramaic, right? And so what the New Testament Gospels, however, refer to the things that Jesus says in what language? New Testament Gospels?

Student: Hebrew.

Dr. Pratt: No. New Testament Gospels. What language are they written in?

Students: Oh, Greek.

Dr. Pratt: Okay, so here you have things that are said in Aramaic being translated into Greek. So did Jesus say the precise words that the New Testament tells us that he said? No, he did not. He spoke Aramaic. Now, there's a difference between truth and comprehensiveness and truth and precision. There's a big difference between truth and precision. Let me just put it to you this way: Can people ever be utterly precise about anything they talk about? No. No, because precision is always a matter of degree. I can tell you it's 2 o'clock, and you might look at your watch and decide no, it's really 2 o'clock plus 15 seconds. In fact, by the time I began and finish my sentence, time has passed, so it's impossible for me to do that with time. It's even

impossible for me to do that with measurements of things, physical things. I'll say this is a foot long, and you'll say, well, is it really a foot long? Well, you say it's a foot long if I measure it with this measure; it's a foot long plus/minus whatever if I measure it with this other instrument. And we come down to where now we're measuring doing micro-measurements of things and that sort of thing. But even they are not precise, because the edges of physical objects are themselves fluctuating constantly. Yes? Alright. On a molecular and on an atomic level they are fluctuating, so there's no way to be utterly precise even in the physical measurements of things. And the same kind of thing is true when it comes to reporting historical events. You cannot be utterly precise.

Now the third category that's often used as sort of the ideal of a journalistic approach to history…comprehensiveness, precision, and the third one is objectivity. You know, newspaper reporters especially are not supposed to let their opinions come out, right? They're just supposed to tell the facts, just the facts, be objective about it. Is that possible? Can human beings divorce themselves from their opinions as they write about history? No. Now sometimes they're very bold about it, and they'll say, "And this was a very bad person." But sometimes they're just subtle. Their selections and the way they turn a phrase and things like that will reveal their bias, their non-objective, their subjective opinions about things. And that's always true in history writing, no matter what type it is, no matter where you find it, including in the Bible. Bible writers were not trying to be utterly objective. They were expressing their opinions. Now their opinions are authoritative and true. Why are they authoritative?

Student: Because they're inspired.

Dr. Pratt: Because they're inspired by God who knows all things. Even though God could say more about it — he could have many other opinions as well — the opinion is correct. So Bible writers were not trying to reach the standards of comprehensiveness, precision and objectivity in some kind of ultimate or utter sense, but we all know that if you don't strive for those levels, those criteria, to some degree, then what you're doing is fantasizing or fabricating and letting error come in, and treating it as if it's true. So while it's true that they can't be utterly any of these things, they are nevertheless to some degree comprehensive, they're to some degree precise, they're to some degree objective in what they are writing down in the Bible. Otherwise, we're straying into leaving out things that are essential, non-comprehensive, or we're being so imprecise that we're misrepresenting what happened, or we're being so subjective, non-objective, that we are simply giving our opinions and the facts don't really matter anymore.

So there has to be some measure of this. And so in the lesson I asked the question, well, how did biblical writers decide how comprehensive, how precise, and how objective they needed to be? And the answer was always to fulfill their didactic purposes. Now we're talking, you see, about something that's really important here, because the didactic purpose does not even deal with "that" world as much as it does with "their" world. Bible writers had purposes in writing, you remember? They're

going to talk about that world to be sure. They're not going to tell falsehoods about it, which means they're going to be comprehensive enough, they're going to precise enough, they're going to be objective enough, but the standard of what's enough is set by their didactic purposes toward their world. And so long as the report of ancient history or past events is comprehensive enough, precise enough, and objective enough to reach the didactic goal, then nobody even questions whether or not they're true.

Now when we say that the degree of comprehensiveness and precision and objectivity depends on your didactic purposes, this means you could talk about the same "that world" for different people in different ways, just depending on who they are, and so long as they don't raise any questions, then everything is just fine. It's precise enough, it's comprehensive enough, it's objective enough. Alright? No problem. This comes up many times with parents and children. If you have one child and you're about to have a second one, the older child often will ask, where do babies come from? Now responsible parents don't tell their little child all the details of biology and explain to them sexual activity and things like that that adults normally go through in order to have a child. They don't do that. If they do, they've traumatized their child. Why would that be traumatic to a child who is maybe three or four years old?

Student: They're not able to understand it.

Dr. Pratt: They're not able to understand it. They're not able to put it into a package. So often what parents will do is they'll tell a very simplified version of how babies are made. Now we all would know that if we told a three-year-old that babies come from cabbage patches, we know that would be a lie, right? That is so distant from the truth. That is so not comprehensive, so imprecise, so non-objective that it would be false. But suppose a parent said something like this to a three-year-old: "Well, Daddy has a very special seed that he puts in Mommy's tummy." Would that be true enough for a three-year-old? Yes, it would be. It would not be a lie. It would be precise enough, it would be comprehensive enough; it would be objective enough for the child to be able to accept that as true. But when the child becomes eighteen years old, hopefully his idea of comprehensiveness and precision and objectivity is a little different than it was when he was three years old.

And so we know the difference between lying to someone — the stork brought the baby, we get them from the cabbage patch, they come out of the sink, or something like that — we know that that's so far from the reality that it's not true, it cannot be accepted as true. But we know also that people are oriented all the time to talking about facts in ways that fulfill their teaching purposes, their didactic purposes, and that depends on the audience. And that's the way it is in the Bible. These standards are met according to the didactic purposes of the writer, and that differs in different periods of time and with different kinds of people, and so on and so on. And that's the way I think we need to look at the history-telling of the Bible.

Question 8:
Do figures of speech make it difficult to discern historical data?

Student: Richard, you talked a bit about using figures of speech in poetry and the poetic nature of the Old Testament. Does that present a problem for us when we look at the Old Testament's history?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it sure does. You know, figures of speech are basically indirect ways of talking about things. We might even say they're more indirect ways of saying things, because almost every time you say something you're being slightly indirect. But figures of speech that we know of commonly are things like metaphors, for example, or similes, or even hyperboles, intended exaggerations. These are saying things about reality out there or reality in your mind, ideas in your mind, but they're not saying them in the most stark or literal, wooden way. They're saying them in figurative ways, figures of speech. And the thing that's important to remember about biblical poetry — and there's lots of poetry in the Bible and so it becomes an important issue for biblical theologians — is that figures of speech are concentrated in biblical poetry, as in all poetry. I mean, this is one of the things that makes poetry different from prose; it's that there's a concentration, there's a lot of figures of speech. So you'll find lots of metaphors, lots of similes, lots of analogies and things like that. And you mustn't take those as being stark, wooden, brash descriptions of historical realities, but rather figurative descriptions of historical realities. And do you remember in the lesson, we used the example of comparing the song of Moses in Exodus 15 which is the poetical, hymnic, with the narrative account, and we said that the narrative account in chapter 14 of the crossing of the Red Sea was closer to stark, closer to literal than the poem was? Now the narrative was not comprehensive; the narrative was not utterly precise. The narrative in chapter 14 was not objective either in an absolute sense, but it was certainly closer to the description, it was less elaborate than what we found in Exodus 15. I mean, you remember, Exodus says that God burned them up. Okay? And nobody was burned on that day.

Student: Quite the opposite.

Dr. Pratt: Quite the opposite. They were splashed with water, okay? They were drowned in water. So when we realize that those kinds of things are in biblical poetry, it's just very important for us to be careful to ask the question, what's beneath the figure of speech? What's the reality that it's talking about? And to be aware of that helps us then discern what historical facts are being portrayed in the poetry of the Bible. It's just important for us because in biblical theology we're interested in knowing what happened in a particular period of time, and if we take the poetry about those times as literal descriptions of what happened, then we're going to have some serious problems in reconstructing what happened synchronically and then reconstructing the theology of it. It's not to say that poetry is not true, but poetry is true in ways that prose is not, and that's what I think is important to say in all of this. Does that mean that you have to do hard, serious exegesis? Yes it does. I mean, that

really is the problem with it. It's not just as simple as just opening your Bible and saying, well, the psalm says this happened, that I'm standing there and a thousand people are falling at my feet because one person is able to kill a thousand. That's a little bit of an exaggeration in most places in the Bible. That's usually not what happens to people. And so you think to yourself, well, then what is it really saying? What's it saying about the facts of the situation? And of course it is that he's having great victory, he sees God's protection, things like that that you could say in a less figurative way. And that's the kind of thing we have to be careful of.

Many people are concerned, for example, with Jesus when Jesus talks about the mustard seed. You remember how he describes the mustard seed? He says it's the smallest of all the seeds. Well, scientifically speaking, it's not. And so Jesus is using here a parable, an analogy. It's a figure of speech. He was not even intending for anybody to take as a scientific statement of what the smallest seed was. And then he says that the mustard seed grows into the largest of all the plants of the garden. Well, there are some plants that can grow much larger than a mustard plant. And so Jesus wasn't even trying to be precise, if you hear what I'm saying. He was not trying to be comprehensive or objective. He was intending to be flowery, we might say. And so when you're reconstructing history for biblical theology, you just have to be aware of that or you will be misled.

Question 9:
Do we have to bring external data even to biblical narratives?

Student: Now is it true that even in narratives that we have to bring in information that is not presented to the readers?

Dr. Pratt: Yes, absolutely. And the reason for this is because the way that Bible writers were often limiting themselves and not saying certain things explicitly — in other words, not being comprehensive as we said, or even precise, or for that matter objective — is because they assume things about their readers, that their readers understood things, that they knew things, and that they don't have to say. I mean, when you tell a story to someone and you know that they understand certain things already, you don't necessarily have to say them. All the details can be left out. And even though those details could be very essential to the story itself, they are never said because you assume that your audience understands that. If they don't understand those details already, then they'll come at you and ask a question and you clarify.

Well, the same kind of thing is true with Bible writers. They said things and talked about things in ways that ancient people often already understood, and they knew that their ancient audience could understand those things, and we as modern people sometimes have to fill in those gaps, fill in those holes with information that we get from other parts of the Bible and even from general revelation like archeology and

things like that. I mean, this is just the fact. And so when you're doing synchronic synthesis of a period of time, you're not just limiting yourself to exactly what the Bible says and only to what the Bible says, but you're asking the question again — because didactic purpose for their world is important — what was the writer assuming they already understood that we may not understand so well? It happens all the time.

Question 10:
What modern archaeological discoveries have helped us understand the Bible?

Student: Richard, can you give me an example of where maybe a modern archeological discovery has helped us understand Scripture better?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, there are lots of them, of course. That's why biblical archeology is so important, right? But one great example is in Genesis 15. When Abraham asked, how can I be sure I'm going to get the land, or my descendants are going to get the land of Canaan? God says go get some animals. And that's all that the Bible says he says. He doesn't say, now go get some animals and do this and do this and do this and do this. All he says to Abraham is go get these animals. And the next thing you know, Abraham's taking these animals and cutting them to pieces and throwing the body parts on either side of a path. Well, you want to know why's he doing that? God didn't tell him to do all of that. But the reason for this is because of Moses' didactic purpose and how much affect it had on him. He knew he was writing about Abraham's life, two people who knew and understood that when God said those words, "go get these animals," that they knew exactly what Abraham was supposed to do with them, and that was that he was supposed to cut them up, take their body parts and throw them on either side of a path. So Moses didn't have to continue with the instructions, if God in fact did give Abraham instructions. We don't even know if he did or not. But he didn't have to continue with them because his ancient audience understood them.

Now for centuries, Christians didn't understand those ceremonies in a way that helped them understand Genesis 15. I mean, why was it, people would wonder, that God says go get these animals, and instead of petting the animals or feeding the animals, he starts ripping them to pieces and throwing their body parts everywhere; people were dumbfounded by this. They could not understand what was happening. But in recent archeological history, we have discovered that what God is doing in this passage is making covenant — the passage says that explicitly — and we have found that there are ceremonies much like what Abraham performed that day, by cutting those animals and throwing their body parts onto either side of a path, there are ceremonies in other ancient Near Eastern texts from many different cultures that have that kind of ceremony and precisely using animals in this way, and we know the meaning of these things because the instructions and the explanations in these ancient

texts, these ancient cuneiform texts, are actually laid out, they're spelled out, and so we know what the ceremony meant. We know that Abraham understand, and we know that the Israelites, hearing the book of Genesis, they understand what was happening, even though we didn't for the longest time. Now we know that what Abraham was doing was preparing for a ceremony of self-cursing, or self-malediction, sort of like young children do in our culture where they make a promise and they cross their heart and hope to die. And that's what Abraham was about to do, because that's what people did in those days. They took animals, they cut them up, threw their body parts on either side of a path, and then when you make your covenant, or you make your agreement with someone, you walk down the patch that is surrounded by all these body parts of animals. And the significance was, if I break my promise, may I be torn to pieces like these animals are torn to pieces — cross my heart, hope to die.

So Abraham understood that. God didn't even have to explain it to Abraham. Moses understood it. His Israelite audience understood it, so Moses didn't have to say it to them. We didn't understand it, but general revelation in the form of archeology has helped us, and has made tremendous sense out of a passage that before did not make sense at all. And so every time we deal with any part of the Bible and we're trying to reconstruct what happens in a period of time through synchronic synthesis, we are bringing information not just from the Bible but from other sources as well, so long as it doesn't contradict what the Bible says, to fill in, to help us understand the significance of events and even what events took place. It happens all the time in Bible interpretation.

Question 11:
Is Genesis chapter 1 poetry or narrative?

Student: Richard, I liked what you said in the lesson in Genesis 1 about the firmament being an imprecise description of the atmosphere, but is what you're saying…is Genesis 1 poetry?

Dr. Pratt: No, I'm not saying Genesis 1 is poetry. I basically believe it is written as narrative, but a particular kind of narrative. Let's see if I can explain it this way. The difference between narrative and poetry is not categorical or binary. It is a continuum, so that you have some poetry in the Bible that's rather extreme in its poetic qualities; it's so elaborate in its use of figures of speech and things like that that you can hardly believe it the way it's talking about things. I think of Micah 1 as a good example of that, describing the approach of the Assyrian army, and as the Assyrian army approaches the mountains melt and flow like wax all over the place, and things like that. That's highly poetic poetry, down to prosaic poetry that is called poetry largely because it comes in those parallel lines, and that's about as much as you can say is poetic about it.

And then the same is true over here with narrative. Narrative can be very wooden, and lots of times reports in Chronicles or in Samuel and Kings are rather wooden, rather straightforward, to where there's a range of narrative where you have actually highly poetic narrative, sort of elaborate, eloquent narrative that will bring in figures of speech from time to time. And sometimes if you're not aware of those distinctions on the narrative end, you can feel as if the writer is trying to be utterly precise when he's really not trying to be utterly precise.

And let's just say this about Genesis 1. And I talk about Genesis 1 in the lesson because it's so controversial in our scientific age and that kind of thing where we think we know a lot about how God made the world. I don't think we know that much about how God made the world, actually, except from the Bible, but scientists seem to think so, and Christians seem to buy into it a lot. But let me just say that when you read Genesis 1, God could have told Moses a very scientific description of the way the world was made. He could have spoken of an atmosphere, earth's atmosphere that separates outer space from the waters of the planet and that kind of thing. And he could have said this is what's going on Moses. Of course Moses probably wouldn't have understood a whole lot of that, but he still could have done it. And I must say that that description that I just gave that sounds very precise to our ears is really not very precise at all. You can refine that to the "Nth degree" and have a lot better description of what the atmosphere of earth is — separating outer space from waters beneath us and that sort of thing.

But in the ancient world, people understand that there were waters above and waters below, and the waters represented for people not simply water "H2O," but chaos. And the collapsing of waters above and waters below represented the collapsing of livable space. They knew that much. One of the reasons they called them waters was because the sky looks blue like water in the Mediterranean Sea often in certain parts looks very blue, sky-like blue. And so it's very interesting that this is the way they understand the world to be. The Egyptians have pictures of water above and waters below colored in the say way in their hieroglyphs, and so it's very nice to realize that this was the way people commonly talked about it. And so Moses is describing in this case the separation of the stuff above us from the stuff below us in ways that are not as precise as some scientific descriptions would be today, but he's describing it precise enough to meet his didactic purposes. And that's always the standard, the didactic purposes.

And so I don't think we have to go so far as to say that Genesis 1 is poetry in order to accept it as being true. All we have to do is simply say it's precise enough for what Moses was trying to do with it. He was not trying to do any more than this. He was trying to explain to them that God had separated the chaos above, which we would call outer space, from the chaos below which we could call the oceans and the deep, the salt water that destroys life as we know it, our kinds of life anyway, and that he has separated those two and kept them separate by this firmament that he put in the sky to keep them that way. And so it's an imprecise way, yes, and perhaps for our scientific minds so imprecise that we find it hard to believe as true, but when we set it

back in the days of the Bible, we realize it's precise enough to reach Moses' purpose and so it's successful, just like saying it's 2 o'clock when it's really three seconds after 2 o'clock. It's that kind of a thing.

Question 12:
How scientifically precise is the Bible?

Student: And would you say that it's the same case here in the story where the sun stood still?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, in Joshua where the sun stood still? Exactly. I mean, we don't believe that the sun's movement relative to the earth changed. We know now that it's the movement of the earth that gives the appearance of the sun moving across the sky, right? And so we have other ways of understanding the expression "the sun stood still." We would say perhaps something happened to the rotation of the earth, perhaps there was some kind of special light effect that extended light over the horizon in ways that we don't understand, those kinds of things. Whatever your answer is to that on a more scientific level, the Bible says the sun stood still, and we have to again understand that the Bible writers were being precise enough about these things to accomplish their purpose for their writers. They were not trying to give an utterly precise description of those realities. And I think that's a wonderful thing to realize. We're not saying, therefore, that they were not true. It was true. The sun stood still.

In fact, we talk that way now in our own day because we're talking about the way things appear. We talk about the sun rising and the sun setting, and nobody says, "Well, that's not true." You don't on the weather report say, "Why are you talking about sunrise tomorrow being at 6:15 a.m.? The sun doesn't rise. You really should be saying that the earth rotates to a certain level that you have now the appearance of the sun in the sky or sunlight in the sky." But it's common parlance and it's precise enough for the meteorologist to say "sunrise", because it accomplishes his didactic purpose, or her didactic purpose, and nobody argues about it. That's the reality that the Bible has, too. And it doesn't make it unreliable for the right purposes. It does make it unreliable in the sense of trying to reconstruct in more scientific senses precisely what happened, but it does not make it reliable in the sense of portraying truth to us, conveying the truth to us that God separated the waters above, the waters below, meaning the chaos above, the chaos below, and created this sphere within which humanity could live and serve its purposes for God in the world. And so we don't have to identify truth with precision. And that again is the important, the key element here.

Question 13:
Why should we include information from other time periods when doing synchronic synthesis?

Student: Richard, in the lesson you talked about synchronism was about collecting all the data about a single time period, but you also said we can bring in information from other periods of time. How can both be true?

Dr. Pratt: Good question. It's assuming that when certain things are being described to us in the Bible about a period of time that we don't get all the information that the people in that time knew just from Bible passages that come from that period of time or deal with that period of time. In other words, there are things that were revealed earlier that we don't know about except by implication, and there are things that are revealed to people later that are not new but rather are the first time it's recorded in the Bible.

So let's back up on that just a little bit. We used the example, for example, of Noah. Noah is told that he's supposed to bring clean and unclean animals into the ark, seven of the clean and two of the unclean. So let's assume now we're dealing with the time of Moses. We're going to do a synchronic synthesis of the time of Moses, and part of what we want to do is we want to say Moses brought in clean and unclean animals. God does not explain in the Bible to Noah the different between a clean and unclean animal. And why not? It's not comprehensive including that kind of information. The reason for this is because Moses had a didactic purpose and audience to whom he was writing, and they knew what clean and unclean animals were. So we assume that for Noah to perform this act that God had commanded, he, Noah, had to understand the difference between clean and unclean animals even though the Bible doesn't tell us that God explained all that to him. So how do we know then what kind of animals Noah brought into the ark? We go to what the audience knew. They knew the law of Moses, and the law of Moses explained to them what were clean and what were unclean. And we bring that information, even though it's from a later period, we bring it back into the earlier period of Noah's day because we believe that Noah had to know that in order to be able to obey the command of God.

So God revealed all kinds of things to people that are not recorded in the Bible, and that we have record of God's explanations of these things only later in the Bible. We come to hiccups like that and we say, well, how did Noah know the difference between clean and unclean? The answer is, remember that Moses is writing to the Israelites about this, and so his record is designed to speak to them. He didn't have to tell them all the other things that God said to Noah that day because they already understood it from their later revelation. So that kind of thing does happen in the Bible a lot. But also many times what we discover is that if we're dealing with something in the Bible that seems obscure to us, sometimes we can look at other periods of revelation and realize that, hey, now this was understand by the people living in that day and I can now make sense of what was going on in that day because

they understand it. We're not talking about developments beyond the day that we're examining. We're talking about things that they already understood that did not need to be reiterated in the Bible.

So for example, one of the things that is said to Abraham is, "Abraham, you're going to have many descendants and you're going to have possession of a land." Now if you read the record of Abraham's life, there's never any explanation given as to why God would do that. Why would God say to Abraham, I'm going to give you babies and descendants, and I'm going to give you a land? I mean, there's absolutely no reason given. There's no theological explanation of it given in the whole life of Abraham from Genesis 12 to Genesis 25. It's never explained. So you're looking at this and you're saying, well, did God ever explain this to Abraham? Did he ever explain to him why he was going to give him children and descendants and give him a land? No he doesn't. Why not? Well, Abraham already understood these things, and perhaps God actually did explain it to him, but Moses did not have to write about that explanation, the reason for many children and a land, because earlier in the book of Genesis he had set us up as readers, and Israel as readers, to understand why multiplication and dominion over the land were so important. Can you guess where that would be? Where did God do that?

Student: In Genesis 2.

Dr. Pratt: Genesis 2, exactly, or Genesis 1, where he says be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, subdue it and have dominion over it. And so that piece of Genesis 1 is assumed as true and known by Abraham, so there's no need then for God or for Moses to repeat that idea that humanity was made to fill up the earth and to have dominion over the earth. It's assumed that Abraham understood that and that we as readers, or Israelite readers, should understand that, too, and then interpret the promise of many children and a land to have dominion over or to possess as connected back to what God had said earlier. So it's not that we're reading in revelation from earlier times into Abraham's life without the assumption that Abraham understood it. Because remember, Moses' record in Genesis is sparse. It doesn't by any means comprehend everything God said to Abraham in his life. When Abraham heard that call, he may have said to God — we don't know — he may have said, well why would I want lots of children? Why would I want a land to possess? Well if he did raise that question with God, God told him. Because it goes back to Adam and Eve, this is what human beings are supposed to do; this is your purpose as a human being. Now the fact that God doesn't re-explain it to Abraham, as far we know, probably assumes that Abraham understood that this is what humanity was designed to do. So it's not that we're reading in other periods of time into the particular period we're interested in, but we're assuming that these are pieces that are needed and that were assumed by the writer as he fulfills his didactic purposes toward his readers that understand more than we often do.

Question 14:
When do we have enough information to interpret a passage?

Student: Well it sounds like it's necessary, first of all, to look outside of a scene to find a full amount of information to interpret what's going on within that scene. But where do we draw the line? How do we as theologians know when we've got enough information to correctly exegete a passage?

Dr. Pratt: Well that's a difficult question because that is a case-by-case, situation-upon-situation issue. I think that really the reality that we all face is that when we come to a particular period of time in the Bible, we are not coming as blank slates. We've got things from the whole of the Bible in our minds, and we can't avoid sort of pushing those things into that era just a little bit, into that synchronic slice, as it were, just a little bit. But we have to be careful. And what we have to be careful of is bringing in ideas that represent developments that are far beyond the period of time that we're dealing with. I mean, the reality is that the Bible develops themes in very elaborate ways as new revelations are given, and we have to be careful not to bring all those assumptions of later revelations into that earlier period. But those later times — the things we learn from later times — may help us understand what they did understand back then that's not spelled out for us there.

You just have to be careful to do that. You don't want to say that Abraham understood that he was going to give birth to Jesus of Nazareth who was born in 4 BC just because that's the great seed of Abraham. You don't want to say Abraham understood all that, but you do want to say that Abraham understood that his family was going to be the leading family of the earth in bringing God's kingdom to the earth, to filling it, to multiply in filling it, subduing it, and having dominion over the earth. And taking the Promised Land and having a great people of God like that was a step toward this greater reality that will come one day, and we can learn a lot of that not just from what's said in Genesis 12 through 25, Abraham's life, but from what's said before it in Genesis and what the rest of the Bible does say that you sort of have to take the later revelations and drop them back, regress back to what Abraham could have understood in his day in continuity with what later occurs in the Bible. I think that that reality is something that we always have to realize, and it's why in this lesson we keep on saying that diachronic analysis of the Bible is always being done as you do synchronic analysis. It's not like this is a one-two step. Diachrony and synchrony actually are like webs of multiple reciprocities; always things relate to each other that way so that they feed on each other back-and-forth, back-and-forth. And the more we do that responsibly and carefully in synchronic analysis that makes sure that we are only saying things from later revelation that would have been believed and understood at that time, then we're doing it in the right way. We're keeping ourselves located in that one period of time.

Question 15:
How do covenants function as middle-level theological structures?

Student: Richard, you identified the middle level theological structures as covenants. Can you explain that a little bit more?

Dr. Pratt: It's important to get this idea that we're saying in this lesson that theological structures that occur in any given time of the Bible can be taken on a small scale or a very large scale. And when you look at the Bible with careful, detailed exegesis, you're usually dealing with very low-scale things, like we give the example I think of Eve being created for Adam and how in that series of a narrative, we talk about this act happened and then God explained it, or God predicted what he was going to do next, so the words and the acts of God form certain configurations. We could pick any others, but that's a very helpful example because it shows that even when you're doing the exegesis of a single passage, you're always interacting with the words of God and the acts of God, and that's an important basic-level item.

Now segmenting that off is just artificial, because we could say can do that from the smallest little piece of the Bible all the way up to the whole Bible, which is basically where we're going on this, but to do that we just simply dissected the Bible or broke the Bible's theology into three levels: basic, middle and then the really complex ones. And it's a continuum, so when we segment them off this way, you realize that's artificial. But yes, I did say that the middle level structures of the Bible, its theology, that in fact cover all biblical passages, the lower level items, are covenants. Covenants in the Bible, the dynamics of the way covenants work.

Now I should make the point here that people who emphasize covenants a lot in biblical theology have different views of how covenants work. It's a problem, because some people believe that certain covenants were unconditional and other covenants were conditional, and they kind of divide them up into the good ones and the not-so-good ones, and that sort of thing. That's not my view. My view is, and that's expressed in this particular lesson, is that all covenants in the Bible share very similar dynamics. It's not to say that they don't have certain emphases, because they do. But the basic functioning of life in covenant with God is the same no matter what period of time you live in. So if we're dealing with a particular passage and we're seeing what God does with people in that passage, what he says to them, to understand the system of theology that surrounds that, you have to understand how covenant works in the Bible. And I lay out this sort of threefold approach to covenants that I think is true of all covenants in the Bible, and that is they stress the kindness and the benevolence of God; that's first, that everything is by God's mercy, everything is by God's grace or his benevolence in the case of before sin came into the world, his kindness to us.

But when God makes covenant he does it in a way that ancient Near Eastern treaties were, and that is that he requires loyalty from the people who are receiving it. And so

God's mercy and human loyalty are not opposites of each other. It's not as if you have one or the other, God's grace or human loyalty. They go together in biblical covenants. And then the third element you'll remember in that chart was consequences, that there are consequences to you loyalty or disloyalty, and they are either blessings or curses, and in one way or another, they all work out that way, all of them. And that's what I mean by that middle-level theological structure.

Question 16:
How do covenants relate to the doctrine of salvation by grace alone?

Student: But isn't salvation by grace alone?

Dr. Pratt: Yes, salvation is 100 percent by grace alone. Let's recast this now in terms of our basic Christian theology. I'm not saying that being in covenant with God, first, is not the same as being saved. That's the first thing because there are people that are committed to God in certain kinds of covenant relationships that are not actually eternally saved. But apart from that let's make this other point. The Bible teaches, yes, salvation is 100 percent by God's grace — Ephesians 2:8, 9: "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourself; it is the gift of God lest anyone should boast." So it's all by God's mercy. But when God shows saving grace to people, when he gives them that saving grace, they will respond to it in certain ways. They will first have initial faith and they will be justified because of that, and then their lives will be characterized by good works; now not perfection but certain fruits of God's mercy in their lives.

That's all I mean by human loyalty, that when God requires human loyalty of us, he in covenant throughout the Bible, Old and New Testament, he's saying basically if you really are receiving my salvation, if you are going to be in good standing with me, then you must also demonstrate that my Spirit is at work in you; as John the Baptist put it bring forth the fruit of repentance, and as Paul put it in Ephesians 2:8, 9 and 10, because the verses go on, yes it is by grace you have been saved through faith, but in verse 10 he says, "For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which he foreordained that we should walk in." So if you are saved by grace through faith, you're going to have this loyalty factor that comes involved. And what the Bible often does is it talks about the loyalty factor, and judgments are made by God based upon whether a person is being loyal or not, because God can see the heart. That doesn't mean perfection by any means, it just simply means loyal to him, that your heart is attuned to him and that you're trying to obey and trying to be obedient. And, the consequences of your obedience and disobedience will show themselves in certain kinds of blessings and cursing both in this life and the life to come — they're different in different ways, and we'll talk about that later on. But the idea is that this is the fundamental dynamic.

It is even the fundamental dynamic that comes to expression in Jesus' life. God sent Jesus as his great benevolence or great kindness, but Jesus was utterly loyal to God the Father, and that's why he receives the consequence of the blessing of resurrection and ascension into heaven and ruling over all things. And we, by having faith in Christ and by living by his Spirit, enjoy the same blessing that Jesus had. And so that basic dynamic is always true, and this is what's important. It's always assumed by Bible writers. Remember how we talked about their didactic purposes? So their didactic purposes toward their audiences govern what they say about that world — shaping their selection, how comprehensive they'll be, how precise they'll be about things, how objective they'll be about things. It shapes it. The didactic purpose is what shapes it. Well, you have to remember that part of the didactic function of a Bible passage is that the author has this basic covenant theology in his mind and often assumes that his readers understand it also. And so original readers of the Bible should not have been surprised when they saw that every passage in the Bible somehow deals with God's benevolence toward people, and they should not have been surprised that that benevolence was always connected to some kind of human loyalty in one way or another, and they should not have been surprised that there would have been consequences of that of blessing and curses, because this is our religion. This is Bible religion. And even though the covenants shift and change in their emphases on these things as you go through the history of the Bible — just take the major covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Christ — though there are differences among them in terms of emphases and the like, they are nevertheless still functioning with that basic theological program.

So to think about all those little balls and lines connecting the balls that represent theological structures, those configurations, connections among the acts of God and the words of God at any given time in the Bible are always being shaped by this framework of divine benevolence, human loyalty, and the consequences of blessings and curses. That's all that's really being said here. So you can take any passage in the Bible and you ought to be able to look at it and say, okay, either it's going to explicitly or implicitly talk about at least three things: God's benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessings and curses. In one way or another, either explicitly or implicitly, every single passage in the Bible does this. I don't care what story you're talking about. I don't care what psalm you're talking about, what proverb you're talking about, what gospel passage you're talking about. They're all about those dynamics. It's always in the background, always working, always functioning, always shaping the theological configurations of the specific acts and words of God in it that are revealed in a particular passage.

So that's why I call it middle level. I call it middle level because it's bigger than a particular passage. So it's higher than your analysis of a specific story, let's say, but at the same time it's middle level because it doesn't stay the same as you go from one covenant to the next, it changes and shifts. But nevertheless, it's extremely important to believe, in my opinion, that the basic covenant dynamics, the relationship between humanity and God did not change as you move from Abraham to Moses to David to Christ. Otherwise, we can't make sense out of the New Testament when it tells us that

you must have good works, that faith without works is dead. How can James say such a thing unless he believes that there is the requirement of human loyalty? And that there will be consequences to this, and that the way we live affects our final outcome because it proves something that's true of our hearts as to whether or not we have had saving benevolence given to us, saving grace given to us. And so all through the Bible that's the way it is.

Question 17:
How does kingdom function as the Bible's complex-level theological structure?

Student: Okay now Richard, you talk about the most complex synthetic structure being that of the kingdom. You sort of talked briefly about it in the lesson. Can you elaborate more about that?

Dr. Pratt: Yes, we did go through it quickly because we're going to go through it again in the next lesson, and again and again and again because I think it is so important. But let's back up just a little bit, back off of it a little bit to explain first what I mean when I say that it's the complex level. Remember the simple level is dealing with what happened in a particular passage or passages down to the details. The middle level is saying basically that there is a frame around every passage, that's assumed in every passage, and it is covenant, the dynamics of covenant — God's benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessing and cursing. That's always functioning, always in the background even if it's not said explicitly. And I am suggesting in this lesson that the mega-structure of the whole Bible is what we can call the kingdom of God. Now that's a New Testament phrase and so it's familiar to Christians. It's not an Old Testament phrase so it may seem a little bit strange to say that that's the theme of the whole Bible, or the multiplied, or complex framework for the whole Bible, the unified framework for the whole Bible. We could call it any number of things, and maybe I should just sort of spell out what I mean by it, and that is that God made the world, and he made history for a purpose. And it really is very simple when you think about it, and it makes sense of so much in the Bible, and I don't know how I ever lived without understanding this, and I don't know how people make sense of the Bible without understanding this. God made the world for a purpose. This world is a stage in which God is going to prove for his own pleasure and his own glory that he is the creator of all things, and the way he is going to do that is he is going to turn this entire earth into a magnificent display of his goodness and his righteousness, and he is going to come here in his glory and fill up the whole place. And when that happens, the way Paul puts it is every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father, because from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever.

When the Bible says everything is for his glory and certain Christian traditions will say, what's it mean to say all things are for his glory? Well, they say, they don't

know, it just means for his glory. Well what that means is at some point, and it's when Jesus comes back, the world is going to be filled up with the visible glorious presence of God so that we won't need to sun and won't need the moon. They'll be like flashlights in the noonday sun, because God's glory will be here. And when that happens, all naysayers, both spiritual ones and physical ones, will be proven wrong. It'll be beyond question anymore because he will have turned this earth into his kingdom. The way the book of Revelation puts it in chapter 11 is, "the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." That's the great hope.

Now what I'm suggesting is that what's said explicitly at the end of the Bible is actually not a new thing. It's what governs everything that the Bible says from the very beginning, and that this was understood by the people who wrote the Bible, and it was understood by the people or should have been understood at least by the people who first received it. Now you say, well why would you believe that? Well the answer to that is because they lived in a very different world than we live in. They lived in a world of empires, and they lived in a world in the ancient Near East of gods who were vying for supreme power over the world, and that meant when a god became enthroned and became powerful in the heavenly places and recognized and glorified, it was because his nation on earth was expanding and growing and building out, and he was taking more of the earth for himself, and this made him special and spectacular. This was common sense to people in the days of the Bible. It didn't have to be stated explicitly. It was so commonsensical that if you didn't understand that, you didn't even understand what you were as a human being except that you were a part of that kind of divine activity. Well the Bible is telling us that this common sense belief that people had back in the days of the Bible was not entirely wrong, but now it's telling the truth about it. Which god is really going to prove he's supreme? How's he going to do it? That's what the Bible displays, and that's why I say that the kingdom of God is the theme of the Bible, and it pops up right at the very beginning of the Bible.

Question 18:
When is the kingdom of God motif seen in the Old Testament?

Student: Richard, could you give us one of those early examples of where the kingdom of God motif comes into Scripture?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah because all you have to do is understand that any time a royal motif is used, that God is a king and that he's doing things like a king, you're talking about the kingdom of God, what the New Testament calls the kingdom or the reign of God. And it happens right in Genesis chapter 1 when God says, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness. Let them rule over the fish of the sea…" and so on and so on. Because the phrase "image of God" which is the first thing that God ever calls human beings was not unknown in the world of the Bible. It was known among the

Egyptians, it was known among the Babylonians, the Assyrians. Even the Canaanites would speak of images of god, sons of god, likenesses of the gods. Now they reserved that for a particular person in society and that particular person was the king. He was the only true image of god; he was the only one who was really the likeness of the god or the son of the god, because his role as a king in the ancient world, Pharaoh for example, was to learn what the gods up in heaven wanted and then to make it happen on the planet down here to display the glory of the god that he worshipped. That was his role. That's why he was called the image in the likeness of god. And what Moses is saying is that the truth of the matter is all humanity was made for that purpose. All humanity is called the image of God because God is the king over all and he wants the planet to be made into his kingdom, and the means by which he's going to do that is his image much like other religions and other cultures believed that their gods were going to make their kingdom by the king. Moses says, no, not just the king. Everybody. This is what God has done.

So right in Genesis 1 we find a royal term; God seated in his heavenly council, which is itself royal, saying let us make man in our image. And so he creates the royal figure — the vice regent we often call them, the viceroy, the representative of humanity whose job it is to be a part of, to be the central part of turning this earth into the kingdom of God. That's magnificent when you realize that. And then when you begin to realize what's the big deal then of Adam and Eve rebelling against God in the garden? All they did was eat from fruit. Well, it was his garden. It was his royal garden. He owned it. So when they disobeyed him, it became extremely significant. Humanity was so significant that, in Bible terms, it wasn't just that humanity was cursed when they sinned — Adam and Eve — but the whole creation was thrown into this chaos because of Adam and Eve. That's how central human beings were, because they were representatives of the king. And he had first told them I want you to take this little paradise and I want you to extend it to the ends of the earth, but they failed while they were still in the little paradise. And so now the whole earth is corrupted. Why? Because of the actions of these two people.

That just shows how all of this is very royal, and even in the right sense, imperial. God is creating his empire on the earth through the Bible. And so that theme continues to be the theme of the Bible all the way through. Israel is selected as the firstborn of all the nations to do more than anybody else, to lead the way for humanity in serving this great king of heaven and turning the world into his paradise, into his kingdom. They don't do so well, just like Adam and Eve, unfortunately. So eventually they are punished for what they did, and that's covenant stuff; they get the consequences of curses because they fail so miserably. And then Jesus comes as the son of David who is the leader of those people who were specially selected, and he brings the kingdom, the spread of God's will to the ends of the earth, to its final stage. He does that in his first coming, and he does it now through the church, and he does it through his second coming. And that's why the New Testament calls the gospel most frequently, the gospel of the kingdom of God — the gospel of the kingdom. That means that the good news that we share with people about Jesus is about the kingdom, that Jesus actually made it happen. That's what is so good about him; he

was so righteous in and of himself that he earned the blessing of God in and of himself. He died for people like you and me that aren't so good so we that can share in it too just by trusting in him and following him. And one day when he returns, he gives that to us to enjoy when God the Father comes and fills up the whole earth.

Now that theology develops through the Bible. People didn't understand the whole picture in every detail of all that, and especially they didn't understand how it all came to Jesus of Nazareth and how he would have a first coming and second coming and everything in between. They didn't understand all that, but they did understand that God made the world for a purpose, and the purpose was to demonstrate that he is the king over everything by turning this planet into his kingdom. So everything that happens in the Bible, down to those little lower levels of each individual passage, and every covenant that God made, are all designed to further that big program of turning the earth into the kingdom of God, defeating evil, eliminating it from the planet, and demonstrating that God is the glorious king over everything. And when you get that, when you understand that, that was the reason for the Bible being written was to explain that to people, then you get the sort of meta-narrative that's behind the whole Bible, the theological structures that are everywhere. I mean, the most frequent way God is revealed in the Bible is he's the king, and human beings are his images, designed to bring his kingdom. He manages his kingdom through different periods of time by covenants, just like kings did in the ancient world; benevolence, loyalty, consequences of blessing and curses, but all for the purpose from him, through him, and for him are all things, to him be the glory as the king over all.

So it really is the mega-structure of the Bible, and if we can start plugging the pieces of the theological structures of the Bible into that framework, then we have a way of understanding how the structures of the Bible in every period of time, every synchronic synthesis is somehow related to that kingdom theme as it was being revealed at that period of time in the Bible. So it's really a wonderful thing. And I'm encouraged to know it, and I think that it draws pieces of the Bible together that sometimes just dangle out there without any kind of unity at all. And this I think is one of the great products, the great results of biblical theology.

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Building Biblical Theology

Lesson Three

Diachronic Developments in the Old Testament

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Diachronic Developments in the Old Testament

INTRODUCTION

In my country we have a game called, "Who's the baby?" The hosts of a party pass out photos of their adult guests from years ago when they were all toddlers and everyone guesses which picture belongs to which person. Usually, at least some pictures can be matched with some of the guests. No adults look exactly as they did when they were that young, but often some facial feature — the shape of our eyes, a bright smile — continue to be similar enough that we can tell which toddlers grew into which adults.

Something like this is true of the theology of the Old Testament. The Old Testament covers thousands of years during which its theology changed quite a bit. The theology, in its more mature stages near the end, is not exactly like the theology of its earlier, younger stages. But when we look more carefully, we can still see that the Old Testament actually represents the same faith as it grew over time.

This is the third lesson in our series *Building Biblical Theology*. We have entitled this lesson, "Diachronic Developments in the Old Testament." In this lesson, we will see that biblical theology focuses on how Old Testament theology developed with the passing of time.

In our previous lesson, we saw that Christians have used three main strategies for understanding the Scriptures: literary analysis, looking at the Bible as a literary portrait designed to convey certain perspectives; thematic analysis, looking at the Bible as a mirror reflecting traditional or contemporary questions; and historical analysis, looking at the Bible as a window to the historical events that it reports. We also saw that biblical theology focuses primarily on historical analysis of the Scriptures, looking especially at the ways God was involved in historical events reported in the Bible For this reason, we defined the discipline of biblical theology in this way:

> Biblical theology is theological reflection drawn from historical analysis of acts of God reported in Scripture.

Biblical theology focuses on Scriptural accounts of God's involvement in history and draws inferences for Christian theology from those events.

In the preceding lesson, we saw how biblical theologians create "synchronic syntheses" of Old Testament theology by looking at periods of history as synchronic units of time, and by discerning the theological structures that resulted from the intersections of divine act and word revelations during those periods. In this lesson, we're turning our attention to a second major concern biblical theologians have with Old Testament theology: namely, "diachronic development," the ways theological structures grew or developed over time.

To explore this subject, we'll touch on three main issues. First, we'll gain a basic orientation toward diachronic development. Second, we'll explore how epochal

developments took place between major historical periods or epochs. And third, we'll look at how specific topics developed over time in the Old Testament. Let's begin with a basic orientation toward diachronic development.

ORIENTATION

One of the best ways to introduce the idea of diachronic development is to focus on what we mean by each of these words. We'll look first at the term "diachronic." Second, we'll turn to what we mean by "development." And then third, we'll look at a biblical example of assessing diachronic development in the Old Testament. Let's look first at the term "diachronic."

DIACHRONIC

Our English term "diachronic" derives from two Greek words: first, the preposition *dia* which often means "through," or "throughout"; and second, the Greek noun *chronos* which means "time." Diachrony is a concern with the passage of time. In the case of biblical theology, the term "diachronic" points to the ways Old Testament theology transformed, changed, or developed through time.

It will help to see how diachronic approaches to the Old Testament relate to synchronic synthesis, the topic of our last lesson. On the one hand, we'll see how it stands in contrast with synchronic synthesis. And on the other hand, we'll see the interdependence between diachronic and synchronic approaches. Let's consider first how they contrast with each other.

Contrast

You'll recall that we compared synchronic synthesis of the Old Testament with paying attention to particular scenes in a movie, looking at relatively coherent segments of a film one by one. Synchronic synthesis focuses on the theological structures that emerged within chosen periods of biblical history. What did God reveal during this or that time? By contrast, looking at the Old Testament diachronically is like concentrating on the storyline of a movie as it moves from scene to scene. It's to focus on the ways a film progressively unfolds its drama from the beginning to the end. Diachronic approaches to the Bible concentrate on how theological structures progressively unfolded through time. How did God's revelations develop as history moved forward?

Consider the relatively short period of time covered by Israel's deliverance from Egypt in Exodus 1:1–19:1. A synchronic outlook on this period would ask questions like: "What did God do and say in this period as a whole?" "What kinds of theological structures were established during this entire time?" A diachronic approach, however, is much more concerned with changes that occurred in theological structures. It asks questions like: "What changes in theology occurred as God acted and spoke in different

ways during this period of time?" "What theological developments took place from the time of Moses' early childhood to his call at the burning bush?" "How did God's revelation at the burning bush anticipate his work in Egypt?" These and many other similar issues become of central importance in diachronic approaches to this part of the Old Testament.

Interdependence

Now as different as diachronic and synchronic approaches may be, they are also highly interdependent. In fact, it's not possible to pursue either approach very far without the other. For this reason, as biblical theologians handle the Scriptures, they move back and forth between synchronic and diachronic work in a variety of ways.

Consider how we must alternate between synchronic and diachronic approaches as our outlook expands from shorter to longer periods of time. To begin with, some diachronic analysis precedes even a very short synchronic synthesis. We have to understand theological changes diachronically to find a way of summarizing what happened in a particular period of time.

Now, when we consider longer periods of time, our diachronic analysis depends on synchronic synthesis. First we make synchronic synthesis of several short periods, and then we trace how theological structures shifted through time between those short periods. Once we have understood this larger period of time diachronically, we can even synthesize it as a whole. This kind of back and forth continues until we reach the full length of biblical revelation.

As different as synchronic and diachronic approaches may be, we must never forget that one strategy cannot be pursued without some degree of reliance on the other. It's not that one approach is more important or even more foundational than the other. Both synchronic and diachronic approaches are necessary if we're going to understand the theology of the Old Testament properly.

Now that we understand the basic idea of a diachronic approach to the Old Testament, we should explain what we mean by diachronic development.

DEVELOPMENT

We use the term "development" instead of simply speaking of diachronic changes to suggest two main ideas. First, changes in Old Testament theological structures always move toward fulfilling God's purposes for history. And second, we speak of development because theological changes only occur through God's providential involvement in history. Consider first the divine purposes behind every change in Old Testament theology.

Divine Purposes

From one end to the other, the Scriptures affirm that everything in history, including shifts in theology, always accomplish God's unfailing purposes for his creation.

Isaiah 46:10 reflects a common outlook throughout the entire Old Testament. There we read these words:

> **I make known the end from the beginning,**
> **from ancient times, what is still to come.**
> **I say: My purpose will stand,**
> **and I will do all that I please (Isaiah 46:10).**

This and many other passages reveal the common Old Testament outlook that history always follows the course, and reaches the goals that God has ordained for it. God's goals for history exist not only as broad, long-term goals, but also as particular, short-term goals. For instance, God has specific short-term reasons for raising David as king over Israel; he wanted to unite the people of Israel by establishing a permanent dynasty and a capital city. During every time frame, theological developments took place that accomplished God's short-term purposes.

But as we have seen throughout this series, God also has an all-encompassing kingdom purpose for history. From the beginning, his design has been to glorify himself by extending his heavenly kingdom to the entire earth through the work of his image and this plan unites all of God's purposes. For example, although David's kingship had immediate purposes in God's plan for Israel, it was one step toward the greater goal of extending God's kingdom to the ends of the earth. The permanence of David's dynasty set the stage for the arrival of Christ, the perfectly faithful son of David who would prepare the earth for the glorious presence of the Father. God began history with this great destiny in mind and every event in history will, without fail, reach this glorious end.

Shifts in Old Testament theological structures were not random or pointless. They were purposeful. They unfailingly brought about God's short-term goals as well as the fulfillment of his kingdom plan. Knowing that theological changes in the Old Testament moved history irrevocably toward God's goals, we need to add that these developments occurred in connection with God's providential involvement in history.

Divine Providence

When we don't pay attention to details, Old Testament theological development often appears like a road seen from a distance. When we stay far above the details, the road of theological changes looks smooth and straight. But when we take a closer look, we see that the road of the Old Testament is actually filled with steep inclines, fast descents, and sharp turns to the left and the right. These abrupt shifts are caused by God's providence, his complex involvement with his creation.

Without a doubt, some divine revelations were connected to historical circumstances in ways we would expect. For example, God commanded Moses to build a transportable tabernacle because the Israelites needed to worship him as they traveled toward the Promised Land. At the same time, some theological developments that took place in the Old Testament often appear to us as random, or inexplicable. The only explanation that we can hold with certainty is that God simply wanted these theological shifts to take place.

Take for example many of the ceremonial practices God required of Israel in the Old Testament. God commanded many practices to make his people into a holy people. Surprisingly, some aspects of these ceremonial laws appear to be marks of holiness precisely because they stand in contrast with the practices of other cultures, including the Canaanite cultures surrounding Israel. But other marks of holiness are very similar to the practices of other cultures, including the Canaanites. In effect, sometimes God commanded the Israelites to distinguish themselves, and other times he commanded them to do things in ways that were very similar to their neighbors. Why did God's revelation do this? What was the reason for these differences in his revelation? Although we may make some strides in understanding, in the end we simply do not know why. The only thing we know for certain is that God determined for his revelation to develop in these ways.

A third type of theological development resulted when God responded to the choices human beings and other volitional creatures made. For example, Israel's history was riddled with human failure that led to God revealing himself in ways that brought about particular theological developments. To name just a few: God offered the first generation of the Exodus possession of the Promised Land, but their infidelity led to their rejection. God's prophets offered Israel the opportunity to repent and avoid his judgment, but Israel's continuing rebellion moved God to send them into exile. Of course, none of these human changes were outside of God's sovereign control. Yet, time and again in Scripture, from a human point of view, many theological developments were contingent on the choices that human beings and other volitional creatures made.

While we are right to speak of changes in Old Testament theology as developmental because they fulfill God's purposes, we must also keep in mind how complex this development was. God revealed himself through his actions and his words in many different ways. And for this reason, developments in Old Testament theology also took place in many different ways.

At this point, we should turn to a biblical example of authors or characters in the Bible treating the Scriptures diachronically. For our purposes, we'll look at just one example that will both illustrate and legitimate our concern with diachronic developments.

EXAMPLE

In Matthew 19:3, some Pharisees tested Jesus with this question:

> **Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason? (Matthew 19:3).**

The question raised here was a matter of debate among rabbinical schools in Jesus' day. And their differences were based on Moses' teaching in Deuteronomy. Listen to what Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 24:1:

> **If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1).**

In Jesus' day, there was controversy over the meaning of the phrase "something indecent." Some rabbis believed this expression implied that divorce was legitimate for nearly anything that displeased the husband, but other rabbis interpreted the term to mean only sexual immorality. Listen to the way Jesus first responded to the Pharisees in Matthew 19:4-6:

> **Haven't you read ... that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female," and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?" So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate (Matthew 19:4-6).**

To answer the Pharisees' question, Jesus gave a brief synchronic summary of marriage based on the first chapters of Genesis.

Notice that Jesus drew attention to a number of particular features about important theological structures "at the beginning," before sin had corrupted the created order. Referring to Genesis 1:27, he noted that God had made humanity "male and female." Quoting from Genesis 2:24, Jesus said that "for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." Jesus then drew the conclusion, "what God has joined together, let man not separate." The original creation ordinance of marriage was that a man and a woman who married became one flesh.

After Jesus described the theological perspective on marriage at the time of creation, the Pharisees asked him explicitly about Deuteronomy 24. Listen to what they said in Matthew 19:7:

> **Why then ... did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away? (Matthew 19:7).**

In line with beliefs in the first century, Jesus and the Pharisees knew that Moses' teaching about marriage was harmonious with the theological structures God had ordained in the beginning. So, how could Jesus defend what he had just said in light of what Moses had said about divorce?

In response, Jesus explained that a significant diachronic development, a theological change, had taken place between the time of creation and the period of Moses. As he put it in Matthew 19:8:

> **Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning (Matthew 19:8).**

Here Jesus noted that by the time Moses gave his laws, God had reacted to human sin by shifting the theology of marriage in certain ways. Looking at Scriptures diachronically,

he compared Moses' time with Adam's day by saying, "it was not this way from the beginning," and then by acknowledging that in the time of Moses the "hearts [of the Israelites] were hard."

So, Jesus concluded that God responded to this human condition by permitting divorce for certain reasons, even though it was not God's ideal. The law of Deuteronomy 24 was God's permissive regulation in response to Israel's hardness of heart.

Jesus' diachronic assessment of marriage and divorce led him to draw a highly restrictive view of the grounds for divorce. As we read in Matthew 19:9.

> **I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery (Matthew 19:9).**

So we see that Jesus understood marriage and divorce in the light of diachronic developments in Old Testament theology. At first, divorce was unthinkable. Later, when sin had hardened the hearts of God's people, divorce was permitted but not endorsed. In this case, a change in the human condition led to a change in Old Testament theology. The way that Jesus handled the Old Testament here demonstrates that treating Old Testament theology diachronically is legitimate and important for us today as well.

Now that we have a basic orientation toward diachronic approaches to the Old Testament, we should turn to the second main topic in our lesson: epochal theological developments.

EPOCHAL DEVELOPMENTS

Imagine you were going to write a letter to a friend about the past year of your life. One strategy you might adopt would be to explain how important factors in your life came together in certain ways so that they broke the year into distinguishable periods. For instance, you could describe how your family life, your church life, and even your inner spiritual condition changed each month of the year. The paragraphs of your letter might begin something like this: "This is what happened in January"; "These things happened in February" and so on.

In much the same way, biblical theologians often describe the development of Old Testament theology in terms of the ways God's revelations divide history into major periods or epochs.

To explore epochal developments of Old Testament theology, we will touch on two issues. First, we will look at the diverse theological emphases of different ages in the Old Testament. And second, we'll explore the organic theological unity among the ages. Let's look first at the ways the Old Testament divides into epochs that had particular theological emphases.

DIVERSE EMPHASES

There are many ways to divide the history of the Old Testament into major theological periods. We could focus on geographical divisions; we could divide the Old Testament in terms of its literary divisions. But in this lesson we'll illustrate epochal developments by returning to an important feature of the Old Testament we have mentioned in earlier lessons of this series: the influence of divine covenants.

As we saw in the preceding lesson, the Old Testament characterizes every divine-human relationship in terms of three covenantal dynamics: the display of divine benevolence, the necessity of human loyalty to God, and the consequences of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. These covenantal dynamics remained constant throughout the entire Old Testament. So, they are useful for organizing the many theological structures that appear in Old Testament history.

But the Old Testament was not merely covenantal in this general sense. There were six times when God established major covenants with distinctive theological emphases: the covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and the New Covenant. For our purposes in this lesson, it will suffice to give a quick overview of the theological emphases of each major covenant.

The six Old Testament covenants fall into three main categories. First, the universal covenants with Adam and Noah. Second, the national covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David. And third, the New Covenant predicted by Old Testament prophets. Let's look at all three groups, beginning with the universal covenants.

Universal Covenants

We speak of the covenants with Adam and Noah as "universal" because they were made between God and all of humanity. So, the theological structures of these covenants tell us much about the relationship between God and all people.

The covenant with Adam refers to the governance of divine-human relations established in the opening chapters of Genesis. Although the Hebrew word *berit*, normally translated "covenant," does not appear in the first three chapters of Genesis, we have seen in other series that there is ample evidence for understanding God's relationship with Adam as a covenant or at least as an arrangement closely resembling a covenant.

As the first divine covenantal administration, the theological emphases of this covenant were so basic to all of Scripture that we may call it "the covenant of foundations." Every particular theological structure revealed from the days of Adam to Noah was deeply influenced by the emphases of Adam's covenant. They all stressed how God was benevolent before sin by placing humanity in his garden and how God was merciful after sin by promising humanity's eventual victory over evil. The relationship between Adam and God also emphasized that all human beings have a basic responsibility of loyal service to their creator. Moreover, these chapters in Genesis illustrate the consequent blessings and curses that come upon human beings as they choose to obey or disobey what God has commanded.

The second universal covenant is God's covenant with Noah. This covenant is explicitly mentioned in Genesis 6 and 9. In Noah's covenant God took into account human propensity for sin and extended patience toward us by providing stability in nature. For this reason, we may speak of this covenant as "the covenant of stability." As God said in Genesis 8:21-22:

> **Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease (Genesis 8:21-22).**

As verse 21 says, God considered the fact that "every inclination of humanity's heart is evil from childhood." So, in response to humanity's persistent sinfulness, God established a long-term strategy of extending the common grace of a new order for nature so that redeemed humanity could fulfill his purposes. God did this by providing a safe, predictable natural realm within which we could stumble and rise again to serve him.

The focus of the dynamics of Noah's covenant characterized every divine revelation from Noah to Abraham. Every divine human interaction during this time was deeply influenced by God's benevolence of long term stability in nature, the universal requirement of loyalty to God and his purposes for all human beings, and specific ways in which human beings faced the consequences of blessings and curses as they formed distinct nations spreading throughout the earth.

National Covenants

Following the universal covenants, God established national covenants with his special people Israel: the covenants with Abraham, Moses and David. In these stages of history, God narrowed his covenantal attention primarily to just one ethnic group, establishing Israel as the nation that would lead the rest of humanity in service to God.

We find explicit references to Abraham's covenant in Genesis 15 and 17. The covenant with Abraham emphasized promises for the numerical increase of Israel and possession of the Promised Land, from which Israel was to spread God's blessings to the entire world. And for this reason Abraham's covenant may be characterized as a "covenant of promise."

Whenever we study the stretch of time between Abraham and Moses, we find that the emphases of God's covenant with Abraham marked the entire period. God's special benevolence toward Abraham and his descendants, his specific requirements of loyalty from the patriarchs, and examples of blessings and curses for the fathers of Israel appear time and again.

God made a second covenant with Israel through Moses when he brought them to Mount Sinai. The primary record of God's covenant with Israel through Moses appears in Exodus 19–24. These chapters emphasize how God gathered the twelve tribes and shaped them into a politically unified nation by giving them the Ten Commandments and the

Book of the Covenant. For this reason, the covenant with Moses may be called the "covenant of law."

The theological structures revealed in the time between Moses and David were deeply influenced by the emphasis of Moses' covenant with God. The law was presented as a divine benevolence to Israel. The law specified ways in which Israel was to be loyal to God. And the particular consequences of blessings and curses were demonstrated in Israel's early national history in accordance with Moses' law.

Later on, when Israel became a full-fledged empire under the rule of David, God also made a covenant with David. We do not know precisely when in David's life God formally established this covenant, but 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, Psalm 89 and Psalm 132 convey the basic content of David's covenant. David's covenant emphasized kingship in Israel. To be more specific, it promised the endurance of David's royal line, Jerusalem as Israel's capital and worship at its temple. Although individual descendants of David would suffer when they turned from God, God's choice of David's family as Israel's imperial dynasty would never be forsaken. For this reason, we may call David's covenant Israel's "covenant of kingship."

The dynamics of David's royal covenant deeply influenced theological structures from the time of David to the end of the Old Testament. In a variety of ways, God granted many kindnesses to and through the house of David. He required loyalty from the Davidic kings and the nation under their authority. And the consequences of blessings and curses for Israel and even for other nations were directly or indirectly tied to the royal line of David.

With the emphases of the universal and national covenants in mind, we should look at the new covenant, the last major covenant mentioned in the Old Testament.

New Covenant

In the later history of the Old Testament, the prophets of Israel faced the time when Israel would go into exile. They spoke, however, of a covenant that would be established after the exile. At that time, Israel would repent of sin and God would bring history to its final, climactic stage. And along with these blessings, the prophets said that God would make a final covenant with his people. This climactic covenant is mentioned many places in the Bible, but listen to how Jeremiah 31:31 speaks directly of the new covenant.

> **"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." (Jeremiah 31:31).**

The new covenant was designed to govern God's people when God fulfilled his promises to re-establish his people after exile and to spread his kingdom through them to the ends of the earth. And for this reason, we may speak of the new covenant as the "covenant of fulfillment."

We will look more closely at the new covenant in future lessons. So at this point we will simply summarize how it unfolded. The New Testament tells us that this age of

fulfillment was inaugurated by the first coming of Christ. His work of redemption on the cross, the victory of his resurrection, his ascension, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the work of the apostles — all of these events initiated this new epoch in biblical history. In our day, we experience the continuation of the new covenant as faith in Christ is spreading to the corners of the earth through the gospel. And we will see the consummation of the new covenant when Jesus returns and makes all things new.

The new covenant characterizes every particular theological structure from Christ's first coming to his glorious return. God's benevolence at this point in history was greater than ever before as he worked through Christ, poured out the Holy Spirit and ministered through the apostles. New Testament revelation also reminds us of the countless ways we receive many benevolences in our day, but when Christ returns we will receive the kindness of our full inheritance in the new heavens and new earth.

In addition to this, the New Testament record of Jesus' time on earth emphasizes that all people were required to be loyal to him. This was true in his day, and it continues to be true in our day. And the New Testament explains that when Christ returns, we will all give him unfailing loyalty.

New Testament revelation also displays the New Covenant consequences of blessings and curses. It reports the enormous consequences for the choices made by those who had contact with Christ and the apostles during the inauguration of Christ's kingdom. It specifies ways in which we are now to consider the consequences of obedience and disobedience. And of course, the New Testament vision of Christ's return involves the covenant consequences of final, eternal judgment and reward.

So we see that the six major divine covenants so permeated the theology of the times in which they were revealed that they provide us with ways of understanding the different emphases of major historical epochs in the Old Testament. Adam's covenant introduced the age of foundations; Noah's covenant began an age of natural stability; Abraham's covenant established promises for Israel; Moses' covenant introduced God's law; David's covenant emphasized kingship and the New Covenant brought all of these earlier covenants to their ultimate fulfillment.

Organic Unity

Despite the differences in emphases in each covenant epoch, we may also speak of the organic unity of the theology of these ages. The epochs of Old Testament history were not entirely different from each other. Rather, they exhibited continuity with each other like the stages of growth in living organisms.

To understand this organic unity more fully, we'll explore three aspects of the relationships between different covenant ages. First, we'll note how Old Testament covenants were unified as administrations of God's kingdom. Second, we'll look into the resulting authority of earlier covenants for later covenants. And third, we'll speak of the need for application of earlier covenants to later covenants. Let's look first at the unity of God's covenants as administrations of his kingdom.

Kingdom Administration

The major divine covenants in Scripture served as the main ways God administered his kingdom through its various historical stages. As Old Testament history moved toward the goal of spreading God's reign throughout the world, God established different covenants to guide life in his kingdom in particular ways at particular times. But all Old Testament covenants shared the same ultimate goal: to extend God's glorious kingdom throughout the earth.

This administrative function of covenants should lead us to expect a great deal of unity among the covenants. They were not separate programs that disregarded or contradicted each other. They were inseparably connected to each other by their one kingdom purpose. In fact, the order in which Old Testament covenants appear reveal their unity. Adam's covenant established the foundational concepts of the goal of God's kingdom and humanity's service in reaching that goal. Noah's covenant established natural stability as the arena within which failing humanity could have opportunity to reach the goal of God's kingdom. Abraham's covenant established Israel as the ethnic group that would lead the rest of humanity toward the goal of God's kingdom. Moses' covenant revealed the law that would guide this leading nation toward the goal of the kingdom. David's covenant brought a permanent dynasty to guide them further toward this same end. And finally, the New Covenant permanently remedies the failures of humanity and completes the goal of God's kingdom. These logical implications among Old Testament covenants indicate that they were all unified as administrations of God's kingdom.

Now that we see how Old Testament covenants administered the one goal of God's kingdom, we should also look at their organic unity in terms of their authority.

Abiding Authority

When we look at how earlier covenant ages were acknowledged in the structures of later periods, it quickly becomes evident that the authority of earlier covenants always extended to later covenants. There are countless ways to show that this is true, but for simplicity's sake we will look in just two directions; first, the continuing authority of covenants before Moses; and second, the continuing authority of the covenant with Moses.

When we see how Moses handled divine covenants that came before him, there can be little doubt that he considered them authoritative for his own day. Consider the book of Genesis, where Moses wrote about the covenants with Adam, Noah and Abraham. These three covenants were established much earlier than Moses' day, but he wrote about them in Genesis to affirm their authority for the Israelites living in his day. Moses did not believe that the earlier covenants of Adam, Noah and Abraham had been replaced or annulled. He wrote about them as he did in Genesis because he believed that they had authority over the lives of the Israelites under the covenant of law established at Sinai. The earlier covenants still had authority to guide the lives of people living in the later time of Moses.

In the second place, when we consider the covenant with Moses itself, it's also apparent that it had continuing authority after his time. For instance, listen to the way Solomon spoke of David's covenant and Moses' covenant together in 2 Chronicles 6:16:

> **Now Lord, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, "You shall never fail to have a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons are careful in all they do to walk before me according to my law." (2 Chronicles 6:16).**

In this passage, Solomon referred first to the covenant of kingship with David when he said that David "shall never fail to have a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel." But notice how smoothly Solomon transitioned to the Mosaic covenant. He added that David's sons would reign "if only your sons are careful in all they do to walk before me according to my law." Solomon's words here demonstrate that the Law of Moses remained authoritative for the people of God even after the establishment of David's covenant.

Now in a moment we're going to add some qualifications to what we have seen, but these examples indicate that later Old Testament covenants did not discount the authority of what God had revealed in earlier covenants. On the contrary, the theological structures of earlier covenant epochs had abiding authority in later epochs.

Extended Application

Now, as important as it is to recognize the abiding authority of earlier covenants, we must also acknowledge that extending the theology of earlier covenants into later periods always required careful application. The principles of earlier epochs had to be applied in ways that were appropriate for later times.

Think about it this way. Every parent knows that when we give instructions to children, those instructions have to be appropriate for their ages. For instance, most of us would tell a four year old, "Don't touch the stove." But imagine one morning you ask your 18-year-old daughter to cook breakfast, and she says to you, "I can't. You told me not to touch the stove." Well, how would you respond? You might say something like, "You're not four years old anymore. It's okay for you to touch the stove now." But suppose she is careless and burns herself. Then, you might say, "Why weren't you more careful? I've told you that stoves are dangerous." And she might protest, "You've never said to me that stoves are dangerous." How would you reply to that? You might say rightly, "I warned you that stoves are dangerous every time I told you not to touch the stove." As you talk to your daughter this way, you're telling her two main ideas. On the one hand, you don't want her to return to behaving like a four year old, but on the other hand, you also don't want her to forget the lessons you taught her as a four year old.

In much the same way, God dealt with his people throughout the Old Testament as maturing children. And for this reason, God's people had to remember two things. First, they were not to turn back to living as if they were in an earlier covenant age. To do that would be to reject more recent, fuller revelations from God. But second, God's

people in later periods were never to forget the wisdom of what God had taught in earlier ages. They were to apply the theology of earlier epochs in ways that took account of God's new act and word revelations. For instance, Noah's covenant built on the theology of God's foundational covenant with Adam, but the principles of the first covenant were adjusted to fit the emphasis on natural stability as the nations spread around the world in Noah's day.

Abraham's covenant embraced the foundational principles of Adam's day and the natural stability of Noah's age. Yet, by the time of Abraham, God had narrowed his covenant focus primarily to Israel as his favored people. And for this reason, the universal theological structures of earlier covenants had to be applied to Israel's patriarchs in ways that were appropriate for them as the chosen people. For instance, the command to multiply and to have dominion over the earth given to Adam was applied specifically to Israel's pursuit of multiplication as a race and possession of the Promised Land. The promise of natural stability was applied to Israel's patriarchs as they enjoyed the blessings of nature in the Promised Land.

Moses' covenant of law reached back to Adam's foundation, Noah's stability and Abraham's promises, but Moses applied these earlier theological structures to the Israelites living in his day in very careful ways. The policies of earlier covenants had to be seen in the light of specific regulations for worship and social life revealed in God's law at Sinai.

David's covenant of kingship built on Adam's foundation, Noah's natural stability, Abraham's promises and Moses' law. But once David's dynasty had been established, all of these previous theological structures had to be seen in the light of the centrality of David's kingship, the city of Jerusalem and its temple.

We can sum up the matter this way. Throughout the epochal developments of the Old Testament, it was never a matter of *if* the theological perspectives of earlier covenants applied to later periods; rather, the important question was *how* they applied. Answering this question is the ongoing task of epochal diachronic approaches toward the Old Testament.

Now that we have seen how Old Testament theology developed from one covenant age to another, we should turn to our third main topic: how biblical theologians have traced the ways specific topics developed in Old Testament history.

TOPICAL DEVELOPMENTS

We've already seen that one strategy for writing a letter to a friend about events of the past year is to describe how many factors come together and divide the year into distinctive periods. This approach corresponds to the ways biblical theologians study epochal developments in the Old Testament. A second way to write about the same year would be to take particular areas of your life, like your family, your church, your spiritual condition and describe how each of these areas developed individually throughout the entire year. Each paragraph of this letter might begin something like: "This is what

happened in my family last year." "This is what happened in my church last year." "This is what happened in my spiritual life last year."

In much the same way, the developments of Old Testament theology can be described in terms of particular topics. To get an idea of how this approach works, we'll look in two directions. First, we'll see how biblical theologians have treated traditional topics from systematic theology. And second, we'll look at the special issue of biblical typology. Let's begin with the ways systematic theology has formed topical concerns for biblical theologians.

TRADITIONAL TOPICS

The topics of traditional systematic theology have developed into a fairly stable set of concerns. For the most part, systematicians first address theology proper, the doctrine of God. Then they turn to anthropology, the doctrine of humanity, and focus especially on humanity's need for salvation. Soteriology follows; the doctrine of salvation. Then, ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church receives attention, and finally, eschatology, the doctrine of last things.

From time to time, even biblical theologians have summarized the theology of the Old Testament following these basic categories. And this has occurred for at least two reasons. On the one hand, traditional systematic theology has had a very long history and has been very useful for biblical theologians. In fact, the results of traditional systematic theology have been so positive that quite often, biblical theologians have found much help there. Good systematic theology has sought to be thoroughly biblical and in so far as that goal has been reached, systematics has much to offer biblical theology. As much as systematic theology needs stimulation from biblical theology, biblical theology needs the rich heritage and stability of systematics.

On the other hand, the topics of systematic theology have often been adopted in diachronic biblical theology because so many evangelicals have believed that the purpose of biblical theology is to provide exegetical information for systematics. In an earlier lesson, we saw that despite their differences, highly influential men such as Charles Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield and Geerhardus Vos looked at biblical theology as the way Scripture is brought to bear on systematic theology. As a result, biblical theology is often thought of not as an end in itself, but as a means for developing a systematic theology that is true to Scripture.

For these and other reasons, it's nearly impossible for biblical theologians to free themselves entirely from systematic theology as they explore the development of particular topics in the Old Testament. And even when they have introduced new insights rising out of their study of Scripture, systematic theology has guided their discussions in important ways. Biblical theologians have explored the Old Testament in terms of theology proper, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology and eschatology. But when biblical theologians are concerned with diachronic developments, they ask this distinctive question of these issues: How did this doctrine develop or mature through the history of theological changes in the Old Testament?

For instance, a biblical theologian might explore theology proper. But rather than concentrating on the doctrine of the eternal Trinity as in traditional systematics, a biblical

theologian would look at the distinctive act and word revelations about God during different periods of the Old Testament, always being careful not to violate later revelation but also careful not to read later revelation into earlier periods. A biblical theologian might ask, "What did God reveal about himself in the time of Adam?" "What did he reveal about himself in the time of Noah?" "What was Moses' doctrine of God?" and so on. As God acted and spoke in history, he revealed more of himself. For this reason, the doctrine of God developed along certain lines in Old Testament history.

In a similar way, biblical theologians have traced how aspects of anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology and eschatology developed through the Old Testament as well. How did the Old Testament develop an outlook on the condition of humanity? How did it display the way of salvation one step at a time? How did the Old Testament deal with the theme of the people of God in different periods? How did it progressively unfold an outlook on the last days?

As biblical theologians have focused on each of these traditional topics, they have often discovered new insights that have been overlooked in traditional systematics. At times, they have even discovered ways that systematic theology should be corrected by biblical theology.

Now that we have an understanding of how topical developments in biblical theology relate to systematic theology, we should turn to a second aspect of topical developments in the Old Testament. We have in mind here a special diachronic issue that is frequently called "biblical typology."

TYPOLOGY

When Christian pastors and teachers talk about this or that being a type of something else, usually they refer to aspects of the Old Testament as types of Christ or some other aspect of the Christian faith. And we often wonder to ourselves, "How did they come up with that typology?" "How did they justify it?" And for that matter, we might even ask, "What exactly is a type, anyway?" There are so many misunderstandings of biblical typology it is no wonder that we raise these kinds of questions.

To explore typology in Old Testament biblical theology, we'll touch on three different issues. First, we'll define what we mean by the term biblical typology; second, we'll look into five important features of typology; and third, we'll explore the process of identifying typologies. Let's look first at a definition of biblical typology.

Definition

The term "typology" is used in a variety of ways in other disciplines such as science and literary studies. Our concern in this lesson, however, is with the idea of typology in biblical theology. In a very broad sense, biblical theology applies the term typology to any diachronic development of topics in Old Testament theology. Every trace of the historical stages of a topic forms typology in this general sense of the word. On occasions, biblical theologians will speak of the typology of the doctrine of God, or the

typology of worship, and simply mean that these are the ways these themes developed in the Bible. But for the most part, modern biblical theologians have used the term typology much more narrowly. We can summarize this special meaning in this way.

> Biblical typology is the study of diachronic developments between the theological structures closely associated with significant persons, institutions and events in Scripture.

In simple language, we might say that typology is the study of types. The word "type" derives from the Greek word *tupos*, which is used fifteen times in the New Testament. In three important passages New Testament writers spoke of particular theological structures in the Old Testament as "types" of other theological structures in New Testament faith.

For example, listen to what the apostle Paul said about Adam in Romans 5:14.

> **Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as Adam did, who was a pattern of the one to come (Romans 5:14).**

Notice here that Paul declared Adam was "a pattern of the one to come." The Greek word translated "pattern" here is *tupos*. From the larger context we know that "the one to come" is Christ. So, in this case, Paul observed that Adam was a type of Christ.

In 1 Peter 3:20-21 the New Testament counterpart to an Old Testament type is designated the "antitype." There we read these words:

> **In the days of Noah … eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you (1 Peter 3:20-21, NASB).**

In this passage the Greek term translated "corresponding to that" is *antítupos* or "antitype." So, in this example, Christian baptism is presented as a New Testament counterpart to Noah's flood.

In Colossians 2 verse 17 the apostle Paul once spoke of Old Testament ceremonial law with a significant variation in terminology.

> **These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (Colossians 2:17).**

Here Paul spoke of Moses' ceremonial law as "a shadow" (*skiá* in Greek) and "the things to come," as "the reality … found in Christ." In a similar way, the writer of Hebrews also spoke of types as shadows and antitypes as realities.

Most frequently, however, New Testament writers did not use any special terminology when they noted biblical typologies. They simply linked or associated particular Old and New Testament elements with each other. For instance, listen to the way Jesus spoke of a typological connection between Moses' bronze serpent and himself in John 3:14-15.

> **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14-15).**

In this passage, Jesus compared the bronze serpent with his crucifixion without any special terminology. But we can still say that the serpent was a type of the crucifixion and that the crucifixion was the antitype of the serpent.

With this basic idea of typology in mind, we should turn to a number of specific features of typology that biblical theologians usually recognize.

Features

For our purposes, we'll give attention to five issues. First, we'll see how typology functions as a figure of speech. Second, we'll focus on the variety of elements in biblical typologies. Third, we'll note that typologies are comparisons of theological structures. Fourth, we'll see how typologies represent theological developments. And fifth, we'll draw attention to the serial character of many typologies in the Bible. Consider first how typologies function as figures of speech.

On a linguistic level, it helps to view the expression of typologies in Scripture as a special figure of speech, or to be more specific, as a figure of comparison. Figures of comparison are indirect ways of describing things by comparing them with something else, just like we do with metaphors or similes, analogies and the like. We can understand a lot about the basic mechanics of typology in the Bible by viewing it as a figure of comparison.

Every figure of comparison operates with three main elements: the image which is the item being compared with the main item in view; the topic which is the main item of concern; and points of comparison between the two. For instance, think about this simple simile, "That skyscraper is tall like a mountain." In this sentence, the image is "a mountain." It is the item being compared to the main concern. The main concern or topic is "that skyscraper," the building in view. And the explicit point of comparison is that both are "tall."

Now when we actually use figures of comparison we do not always state all three of these elements explicitly. But the image, topic and one or more points of comparison are at least implied for any figure of comparison to communicate successfully. These three elements also appear either explicitly or implicitly in biblical typology. First, a "type" functions as an image, an item that is being compared with the main item of concern. Second, the "antitype" is the topic, the item to which the type is being compared. And third, the type and antitype are linked to each other by one or more points of comparison.

For instance, you'll recall that in Romans 5:14 the apostle Paul declared that Adam was "a pattern, or type, of the one to come, that is, Christ." So, in this case, Adam is the image or type who is being compared with Christ, and Christ is the topic or antitype. The points of comparison between Adam and Christ are explained in the larger context of Romans chapter 5. Adam is a type of Christ because both the actions of Adam

and the actions of Christ had widespread and related effects on people who were identified with them. On the one hand, those identified with Adam died. And on the other hand, those identified with Christ received eternal life.

A second feature of biblical typology is that compared elements are quite varied. Comparisons are made between different kinds of things. There are many ways of classifying the elements that function as types and antitypes, but it's helpful to think of them in three basic groups. Types and antitypes may be significant persons, institutions, or events. By persons, we mean characters that appear in the Scriptures, like significant human characters, spiritual creatures, God, and on rare occasions other aspects of creation that are personified. By institutions, we mean enduring historical realities like significant real estate or locations of lasting significance, rituals, organizations, important buildings and the like. And by events, we simply mean significant historical occurrences, things that happened. Types and antitypes can consist of every combination of these three elements.

The examples of New Testament typology we have noted already reflect some of this variety. Paul's typology between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:14 compared one significant person with another significant person. In 1 Peter 3:21, Peter compared the event of Noah's flood with the institution of Christian baptism. In John 3:14, Jesus compared the event of Moses lifting the bronze serpent with the event of his own crucifixion. Other combinations occur elsewhere in Scripture. Whatever the case, typologies compare significant persons, institutions and events.

In the third place, typologies in the Bible always compare the theological structures that are closely associated with their elements. Unfortunately, well-intending evangelical biblical theologians often become so intrigued with typology that they find types and antitypes nearly every time they see any similarity between two items in Scripture. But their comparisons frequently involve only coincidental features, rather than substantial theological connections.

For example, Abraham had two hands, but there is no good reason for thinking that Abraham was a type of later biblical characters who also had two hands. The fact that people wore robes at more than one time in the Old Testament does not indicate that they were types and antitypes of each other. These sorts of comparisons deal with little more than historical coincidences.

Instead of being distracted by such insignificant comparisons, well-founded typologies consist of comparisons of significant theological structures associated with their elements. The elements of typologies, persons, institutions and events do not stand alone in their typologies. They serve as synecdoches, parts that stand for larger, closely associated theological ideas. When biblical writers mentioned particular persons, institutions, or events as elements of typologies, they had in mind the larger theological structures that those elements represented.

For example, consider again Paul's example of Adam as a type of Christ in Romans 5:14. Paul did not compare the fact that both men had hair. He did not draw attention to the fact that both had two eyes and two ears. Instead, Paul noted this typology because he was comparing the theological significances of Adam and Christ. Paul's comparison was based on the observation that both men had massive impacts on the status of the people identified with them.

The same may be said of Peter's typology between Noah's flood and Christian baptism in 1 Peter 3:20-21. The larger context of Peter's epistle makes it clear that he was concerned with the theological significance of the flood as the way Noah passed from a world of divine judgment to a new world blessed by God. And of course, Christian baptism is associated with similar beliefs because it symbolizes our passing from a world destined for judgment to the new creation in Christ. It was on this level that Peter compared the waters of Noah's day with the waters of baptism.

A fourth characteristic of typologies in Scripture is that they always reflect diachronic developments. When the Scriptures identify types and antitypes they always belong to different times in history and so, they reflect diachronic theological developments between those times. For this reason, as with all figures of comparison, typologies will involve both similarities and differences between their elements. On the one side, we're able to see similarities. Certain persons, institutions and events are types of later persons, institutions and events because their theological significances were similar. But on the other side, these comparable elements were also dissimilar; they were never precisely the same. With the passage of time, new revelations took place between types and antitypes that caused developments in their theological significances.

Think once again about Paul's typology in Romans 5:14 where the type is Adam and the antitype is Christ. Now, as we have seen, Adam is theologically similar to Christ in that both had widespread effects on the way God viewed all who are identified with them. But we should also notice that Paul stressed a very important difference between them due to diachronic developments. Listen to what he said in Romans 5:15:

> **But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! (Romans 5:15).**

Notice here that Paul did not simply point to the similarities between Adam and Christ. He noted a crucial difference between them. Adam lived in the earliest epoch of biblical history and his act of disobedience introduced sin and death into human history. Christ, however, lived in the last stages of biblical history when God's purposes of redemption were to be accomplished. As a result, Christ's obedience brought eternal life. The differences between Adam and Christ were just as vital to Paul's typology as their similarities, and the same is true for all typologies.

Another feature of typologies is that they often appear in series. Rather than consisting of just one type and antitype, they can involve a series of three or more elements. For example, consider the serial typology of worship in the Old Testament. In general terms, we should say that at every stage, worship by human beings on earth always imitated and reflected the angelic worship of God in heaven. But the practice of worship on earth developed historically and these historical developments created serial typologies. In the first place, worship began in the days of Adam and Eve when God set them within his holy garden. Listen to the record of Genesis 2:15:

> **The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15).**

The language used to describe Adam and Eve's work in the garden is unusual. It appears elsewhere in the Pentateuch in places like Numbers 3:7-8 and 8:26, where Moses described Levitical service in the tabernacle. Moses' use of the language of tabernacle worship to describe Adam and Eve in the garden indicates that Moses saw a typological connection between the Garden of Eden and the tabernacle. This typology is confirmed by the fact that the architecture and decorations of the tabernacle itself reflected the paradise of the Garden of Eden.

The way Moses described the activities of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden indicates that the theological structure of worship began with the Garden of Eden. When humanity was cast out of the garden, a diachronic development in worship took place. As the examples of Abel, Seth, Noah and Abraham indicate, God called for his people to continue worshipping him outside of the garden by building altars for worship in different places.

Later when God called Israel out of Egypt and made a covenant with them at Sinai, another significant diachronic development took place in worship. Israel's worship was centralized at the tabernacle around the ark of the covenant, God's royal footstool on earth. Then, once Israel had settled in the land, another diachronic development in worship took place. God called for his people to transfer the ark of the covenant and to worship at the permanent structure of the temple in Jerusalem.

Finally, after the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, the prophet Ezekiel announced a new revelation regarding worship. He predicted that after the exile an even greater temple would be built when David's kingship and Jerusalem were restored. Not surprisingly, during the days of Zerubabbel, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah insisted that those who had returned to the land of promise after exile were to build a new temple for the worship of God.

So, then we see a serial typology among the various theological structures of worship beginning with the Garden of Eden, and extending to the early altars before Moses' day, to the tabernacle of Moses, to Solomon's temple, and to the temple of Zerubabbel. Many times in the Old Testament, God repeatedly addressed important theological issues associated with significant persons, institutions and events. And his repeated attention to these matters often formed serial typologies.

Now that we have seen five important features of typologies in Scripture, we should turn to a third issue: how to identify typologies in the Old Testament. What procedures should we follow as we explore the developments of specific theological structures associated with Old Testament persons, institutions and events?

Identification

We will answer this question by taking up two major outlooks on typologies. First, typology viewed as anticipation. And second, typology viewed as reflection. Let's think first of typology as anticipation. When we think of typology as anticipation, we have in mind the belief that when types appeared in Old Testament history, they were designed to point toward future antitypes. Throughout the history of the church, the vast majority of interpreters have treated scriptural typologies in this way. In this view, God

sovereignly placed significant persons, institutions and events in history to indicate to the people living in those days what was coming in the future. This traditional outlook has characterized most Christian approaches toward typology including the early decades of evangelical biblical theology.

Now in recent days, many biblical theologians have dismissed this traditional anticipatory view in favor of an approach that is often called "intertextuality." Intertextuality treats typologies simply as literary phenomena, the ways one biblical text treats another, rather than treating typologies as historical realities arranged by God to indicate what was on the horizon. Biblical typologies are reduced to the ways later biblical texts handled earlier biblical passages for particular theological ends.

In contrast with these recent tendencies, New Testament authors described typology as "interactualities." In other words, types were historical realities that actually anticipated future historical realities as their antitypes. As you will recall, in Romans 5:14, Paul called Adam "a pattern of one to come." Paul wrote about the historical Adam, not merely the text of Genesis, as foreshadowing the historical Christ. In a similar way, in Colossians 2:17, Paul identified the type of Old Testament ceremonial law as "a shadow of the things that were to come." His metaphor of shadow suggests that the ceremonies of the Old Testament resulted from realities in Christ casting their shadows into the historical realities of the past. Following the New Testament witness, we should affirm that in his providence God arranged history so that some earlier persons, institutions and events anticipated or foreshadowed later persons, institutions and events.

One question that often arises from affirming an anticipatory view of types is this: Did people living in the Old Testament understand the future to which types pointed? Were characters and writers of Old Testament times able to know what antitypes were on the horizon by looking at the types of their day?

There are senses in which we should answer "yes." In the first place, we cannot rule out that from time to time God gave specific, special revelations to people that enabled them to have such foreknowledge. For instance, perhaps prophets and other leading figures in the Old Testament were able to see, to some extent, how types anticipated future antitypes.

In the second place, at times people living in the days of types could anticipate future antitypes by applying more ordinary means. Quite often, types in the Old Testament were associated with theological structures whose future developments God had already revealed. That is to say, God had indicated the ways certain theological structures would move forward toward a greater end. Insofar as early types were associated with these previewed future realities, they indicated what kinds of future antitypes could be expected.

For example, as we have said throughout this series, in Genesis 1:28 God revealed the ultimate destiny of Earth to Adam and Eve when he commanded them to extend the paradise of the Garden of Eden to the entire earth by multiplying and having dominion over the earth. From the very beginning, God revealed that he had ordained his image to turn all of the world into a wondrous, holy place like Eden. Adam and Eve understood that the wonder of the Garden of Eden itself was a type, an anticipation of what would one day be true of the entire world.

In Genesis 15:18, God identified the river boundaries of Abraham's Promised Land in ways that connected it with the rivers in the land of Eden. So, as Abraham

walked through his promised land, he understood that his land was not an end in itself, but the starting point from which his descendants would spread the blessings of God throughout the earth. This is why Paul concluded this in Romans 4:13:

> **Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world (Romans 4:13).**

The land promised to Abraham was the beginning point for Israel's expansion of God's blessings to the ends of the earth. In this sense, much like the Garden of Eden, the Promised Land given to Abraham's descendants was also a type that anticipated what the entire world would be like one day.

In addition to this, the borders of the Promised Land mentioned in Genesis 15:18 were the boundaries that David's kingdom reached generations later. David reached the full extent of the land promised to Abraham. From there, David's faithful descendants set their eyes toward spreading the blessings of God to other nations. So in this sense, the establishment of David's throne over this region of the earth also anticipated what would one day happen to the entire world. Listen to the way Psalm 72:11, 17 anticipate the rule of a future son of David:

> **All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him… All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed (Psalm 72:11, 17).**

So, we see then, that as Adam and Eve were to extend their reach from Eden to the ends of the earth, as Abraham was given the Promised Land to extend God's blessings to the ends of the earth, the house of David possessed the Promised Land to extend God's rule and blessings to the ends of the earth.

At each stage, what God accomplished anticipated what was going to come about in the future. His people could anticipate to some extent, the typological significance of what they were experiencing in their day and how it pointed to a greater antitype in the future. In many other cases, people in the Old Testament who understood the purposes of God were able to see how certain persons, institutions, and events were types that foreshadowed things to come. Their understanding was certainly limited, but they could grasp many aspects of the ways types in their days anticipated the future.

Now as true as this is, it's also important to realize that in many other cases, understanding types and antitypes is not so much a matter of anticipation, but of reflection. Identifying how most types would develop into their antitypes involves reflecting from the vantage point of later times on earlier persons, institutions and events.

Consider this analogy. Suppose you have an acorn in your hand and you want to know what it will look like as a mature tree. A full grown oak tree looks very different from an acorn. So, apart from some supernatural ability to predict the future, it is not easy to know much about what the acorn in your hand will look like as a mature tree.

In many respects, this was the situation that human beings faced in the Old Testament. Types often look so different from their antitypes that anticipating their developments would have been nearly impossible. For instance, although Peter identified Noah's flood as a type of Christian baptism, who in Noah's day could have imagined that

the worldwide flood of that time anticipated the baptism of individuals in Christ? It would have been nearly impossible for the average Israelite living in Moses' day to know that Moses' bronze serpent foreshadowed Christ's crucifixion. The antitypes simply look too different from their types for them to have been predicted apart from supernatural revelation.

So let's return to our analogy and go a step further. Suppose we slice off a bit of the acorn in our hand and perform a thorough analysis of its DNA. By doing so, we learn much more about the underlying characteristics of the acorn. Even so, DNA does not determine every feature of the mature tree into which the acorn will grow. We could be sure that the acorn would grow into an oak tree, and not into an apple or pear tree. But we could not know many specific things like its height, the number of branches or the size of its root system. These features are influenced by external forces like weather, water supply, nutrition, light, and disease. They are not determined entirely by the genetic code.

In much the same way, we may be able to understand the genetic code or the theological structures associated with significant persons, institutions and events that serve as types in biblical history. This knowledge may provide us with some expectations for later developments, but the developments between a type and its antitype are not entirely predictable by this means. New revelations from God often take history in unexpected directions. Even with a thorough understanding of the theological significance of a type, we cannot always predict the details of its antitype.

Instead of trying to understand types and antitypes by predicting the latter from the former, we must usually rely on a process of reflection. Like biblical writers, we have to take advantage of our historical situation and reflect on the ways that earlier persons, institutions and events actually developed into later antitypes.

To return to our analogy again, if we have a handful of acorns and plant them along with many other acorns, after a number of years we'll be able to compare a DNA analysis of each tree in the forest with our original DNA analyses of each acorn. From this vantage point, we'll be able to identify which tree came from which acorn. In much the same way, from the vantage point of knowing the theological structures of later periods in biblical history, we are able to identify types by comparing their theological structures with the theological structures associated with later persons, institutions and events.

As a Christian, Paul understood the theological structures associated with Christ's obedience and was able to see the comparison with similar theological structures associated with Adam's disobedience. On this basis, he spoke of Adam as a type of Christ. Peter understood the theological structures associated with the water of Christian baptism and noted the correlations with the theological structures associated with the water of Noah's flood. Jesus grasped the theological significance of his crucifixion and put that side by side with the similar significance of the bronze serpent in Moses' day. So, while types truly anticipated their antitypes, normally we can only identify these anticipations after their antitypes have appeared in history.

Once we grasp this process of reflection, we can see that identifying typologies is an important part of studying diachronic developments in the Old Testament. To be sure, when the Scriptures identify typologies, they are normative and we must not contradict them. But the Scriptures do not explicitly trace diachronic theological developments exhaustively. As biblical theologians explore the full range of theology in the Old

Testament, they must learn the theological significance of persons, institutions and events in later revelation, and then identify their anticipations in earlier periods of revelation. In this way, they can see how the theology of the Old Testament developed over time.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we have examined diachronic developments in the Old Testament. We have gained a basic orientation toward diachronic or developmental approaches to Old Testament theology. We have seen how Old Testament theology progressed in historical epochs or stages. And we have explored the developments of specific themes in Old Testament theology as well.

Many more things could be said about diachronic developments in the Old Testament. But grasping what we have presented in this lesson will provide a solid foundation for further investigation into the ways theology developed from the early days of Genesis to the last days of the Old Testament.

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Building Biblical Theology

LESSON THREE

Diachronic Developments in the Old Testament

Faculty Forum

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Building Biblical Theology

Lesson Three: Diachronic Developments in the Old Testament

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Jean Mondé
Rob Griffith

Question 1:
What is the difference between "diachronic" and "synchronic"?

Student: Okay, Richard, now we've had a lesson on the diachronic approach to Scripture. Can you talk a little bit about the differences between that and synchronic?

Dr. Pratt: Let's review that real quickly because it is important that we get it, that everybody sort of has that in mind, because if we don't have that, we can't go anywhere. Synchronic means looking at things as if they are happening at the same time. Now, the measurement of time is the problem, because if you have more than 2 or 3 nanoseconds, even human beings can tell that things move and change. So it's somewhat artificial when you take let's say a hundred years of Bible history and you say, okay, there're our one period of time, or some people would go a thousand years, there's our one period of time. It can get so big that it's ridiculous to call it synchronic. But the idea is that you're looking at a part of the Bible, the part of a history of the Bible that is happening at the same general time. Diachronic, like the etymology says — through time — means that you're looking with a focus on how things develop, and in biblical theology we do both things. Biblical theologians will take a slice, what I often call a synchronic slice of history, pull it out and look at it, and they'll examine it for what it is in and of itself, and then they'll push it back into the time frame and then set it in conjunction with other things to see how movement occurs from what happened before and what happened after, and how the development occurs through time. So that's the basic idea.

Question 2:
Do we start with synchronic or diachronic analysis?

Student: So which one do we start with, synchronic or diachronic?

Dr. Pratt: Both. Always both. It's just like any other aspect of interpreting anything including the Bible. You don't start a blank slate and then choose step one. We can't do that. We always come to the Scriptures with all kinds of information and ideas and feelings and habits and things that are already priming us, as it were, preparing us for

jumping in. And so what a person does is come with a lot of synchronic and diachronic background already, having looked at the Bible either formally or informally, either in their younger age or in their later age, however it may be, but you've got a lot of that already going on. And then what you do is say what I want to do now is look at this section of the Bible synchronically, or I want to look at this diachronic movement. And even when you make that sort of artificial step into the melees of what you're doing when you interpret the Bible, even then there's not a right way to start. It's not as if you can identify what goes on in a period of time and then, because that seems simpler — and it does in some respects — but then you can stretch it out and see how it develops over time. The fact is that every synchronic period has diachronic movement, and so in order to make your synchronic synthesis, you have to already have at least implicitly accounted for the diachrony that's in that segment of the Bible. And that's the problem.

Question 3:
Does synchronic or diachronic analysis have priority over the other?

Student: Now is there one that should have priority over the other, though?

Dr. Pratt: No. Priority has to do more with what you're trying to do. If you're trying to understand how this part and this part connect to each other, then you're going to give priority to diachronic analysis. But if that's not your goal, if that's not your purpose for study at that time, then you're going to go ahead and just do synchronic primarily and minimize the diachronic concerns. You know, I just think that when you look at the Bible and the way it treats itself, it does both. Sometimes Bible figures will emphasize one or emphasize the other. They'll do one first, then move to the second. But even they are not coming at it as a blank slate taking step one, taking step two. They're coming with a whole tradition, a whole knowledge of what's going on in the Bible already, and they're even talking to people that know a lot about it already. And so they are stepping into this process with a lot of background that is unspoken. And that's always the case. We must always remember that. Any time you take the exercise of reading the Bible and interpreting it and you break it down into steps, it's artificial, always artificial. No matter what the discipline, no matter whether it's systematic theology, biblical theology, whatever it may be, it's always artificial to some degree because you're brining all kinds of things that are unspoken to your methodology. And of course that's true for everything we do in life.

Question 4:
Did biblical authors ever use synchronic and diachronic approaches at the same time?

Student: Now Richard, can you give us an example where a biblical writer is using both the synchronic and diachronic approach?

Dr. Pratt: I think we actually do it in the lesson, so let me see if I can just pick that one, and we can go further if you'd like. In Romans chapter 5, the apostle Paul is working out the significance of Jesus and how big his significance was. That's really sort of the goal in Romans 5. And the way he does that is he compares Jesus with Adam. So what he basically does in Romans 5 is he does a synchronic assessment of the period of time from Adam to Noah first, and then he does a synchronic assessment of Jesus and what he did in his time. So what does he say about that period from Adam to Noah? One of the things he observes is he says people in that time did not sin by violating the law or a direct command of God like Adam did. Adam violated a specific command that was given to him directly, but from the time of Adam's fall all the way up to the law of Moses, in fact, there's no commandment that's given explicitly at least in such major proportions. I don't know exactly what he meant, but let's just put it that way. And so they did not directly violate a categorical command from God, shall we say? So then he asked the question, well, in that period of time were they sinners or not? Since there was no law, well, were they sinners? Now the way he assesses that is he goes further into that period of time and he looks at different theological configurations that are in the Bible talking about the period from Adam to Moses, and he says, well, yes they were sinners, and the reason we know that is because the people in that period of time died. So he's taking all kinds of things from the period of Adam to Moses and he's bringing them together in a synthesis and concludes because they died they were therefore sinners.

So on the basis of that, he makes his point that Adam's fall into sin was catastrophic in its effect. I mean, it was huge in its effect. Then he takes that synchronic assessment of that Old Testament period and he moves to Jesus and he says now look at what Jesus has done. Just as Adam brought in a whole age where people died even though there was no law, specific commands, Jesus has brought even more life. And so he first does this synchronic assessment, then he does that synchronic assessment of Jesus and what he had done, and then he compares the two to make the point that Jesus is greater than Adam was, and so, that salvation is greater than the death that Adam brought. So that's two synchronics connected to each other, two synchronic assessments connected by diachronic assessment.

Student: Okay, let me see if I understand this, because it's starting to be a little bit clearer for me. Another example — I'm thinking of Jesus' response when he was questioned about divorce — it seems like two different situations. But his first response was the two are created one…

Dr. Pratt: Two become one flesh.

Student: Two become one flesh, and that is a synchronic assessment.

Dr. Pratt: Before sin.

Student: Before sin.

Dr. Pratt: Right, because he says it was not so from the beginning. So he's saying now at that beginning that's not the way things worked.

Student: Okay, but later on because of their sin, because of their hardness of heart, Moses allowed them. So he makes a synchronic assessment, their hardness of heart is a synchronic assessment, but the transition between the two, that's a diachronic change.

Dr. Pratt: That's diachronic. And how do you take what was true before the fall into sin — the two shall become one flesh, no permission for divorce, no commands for divorce, no policies for divorce. And then you come up to Moses who's the spokesperson of the same God who said this in the beginning, and he gives a policy for divorce. And so Jesus says, okay, you've got this situation — there was no sin, it was not fallen, it was not so from the beginning — and then you have this situation where the people's hearts are hardened, and so he takes that data and works it together into a synchronic synthesis, and he says that's the reason God gave that command because you're so hardened. And then he compares the two and decides, well, what Moses was giving them as policy of divorce was not God's ideal. That's God's ideal over here with Adam and Eve. But this he gave by permission. He was not endorsing it. He was permitting it because of the hardness of their hearts. Now a lot of Christians don't like that idea that God would do that kind of thing — give permission for something that he really didn't like, but he does do that a lot in the Bible. And that would be two synchronic assessments with this diachronic trace between them, comparing the two ages.

Question 5:
Why does the theology of the Bible change?

Student: So given God's immutability, why does theology change?

Dr. Pratt: Do you mean our theology? It changes because we're always trying to get closer to the Bible, but I think maybe the more basic question is why does the theology of the Bible change? I mean, it's not making mistakes like we do. I mean, we know why we have to keep reforming our theology is because we're not perfect, but we believe that the Bible's inspired. So if God is inspiring the Bible and he is unchanging, why does the theology of the Bible change like we've said here from the days of Adam to the days of Jesus and the sorts of different settings that we've already talked about?

I think we just have to realize a couple of things, and the first thing is that when we say God is unchanging, sometimes we overestimate what we mean by that. When we say he is immutable, systematic theologians have worked this out rather carefully, and it doesn't mean that God is unchanging in every imaginable way. It doesn't mean

that. It means basically that he's unchanging in his character, he's unchanging in his covenant promises, and he unchanging in his eternal decrees. And that does not mean, however, that God does not say to one person one time pick up the pail of water, and the next person another time, put down the pail of water. That doesn't mean that God's character has changed. It doesn't mean his eternal decree has changed. It doesn't mean his covenant promises have changed. That's really important because I think that sometimes people get the idea, and it's probably the influence of Hellenism and things in the background of who we are, that immutability, divine immutability, means that it's impossible for him to say different things at different times or expect different things at different times from his people, or reveal things that are different at one time than another. And that is not the case. For that to be true, you have to have a God other than the God of the Bible.

So what we're saying here is that theology in the Bible changes primarily I think because God does not real everything about himself and his will for his people all at once. Don't ask me why he did this, but what he decided to do was to sort of pull this thing back layer by layer by layer. Now I think we could speculate as to why, but honestly, I think the only answer is because he decided that would glorify him the most, to keep certain things secret and not reveal them until later. And so he did that, and as a result of him revealing more of himself and his will, every time he does that, every time he opens up or pours a little more information in, or a few more commands in, those kinds of things, they mix in with what's already there, with what's already been revealed and has a changing or transformational effect on what God had told people prior to that time, what was in effect at that time. He pours in, things change.

Well, this is the analogy the apostle Paul uses. Just like parents when they teach their children, they'll teach them certain things, and then as they go a little further in maturity, they'll tell them a little more. Well that little more isn't just added on like a layer on top of a layer, it actually mixes into what was there already, and the child has to learn how to incorporate it into what was already a part of the belief system that the parent had given.

Student: I see. So then what are the limits to the changes that are occurring in the theology of the Bible?

Dr. Pratt: Well the non-answer answer is whatever the Bible does. Those are the limits. In other words, we may have preconceptions of what the limits are that find themselves dashed to the ground when you look at the Bible itself. I mean, just to give you an example, it would be very difficult for us to have guessed that the God who commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son would then say that anyone who sacrifices their children later in the law of Moses deserves to die. Now that would not have been something we would have expected. It would be something that would surprise us for the most part, I think. But that's exactly what he does. It would not be expected, I think, to hear that God has all these rules and regulations for sacrifice this animal, sacrifice that animal, do this ritual or this, do this ritual for that, and if you

don't do that, then curses are going to come upon you, and then find that later in the New Testament the same God is saying if you do those rituals, I'll curse you. That would surprise us.

But apart from just saying that the limits are what the Bible tells us, and don't be too hung up on specifics until you look at the Bible and discover what it does, I think we could say a couple of other things that are very important. All of God's revelations are true to his immutable character, they're true to his eternal decree, they're true to his covenant promises that will not be broken. That's one thing we can say. And sometimes that knowledge, knowing that, helps us understand revelations as they are displayed diachronically, because you could get the impression that God is willy-nilly sort of changing who he is. I had a Sunday school teacher that told me that, that God in the Old Testament is mean and God in the New Testament is nice, and she said, "Boys and girls, aren't you glad that you live in the New Testament?" And of course we were glad because we didn't want a mean God, we wanted a nice God. But she was wrong about that. God didn't change who he was from one to the other. And so knowing that his character doesn't change, his covenant promises don't change, and that his eternal decree doesn't change, helps limit and guide us as we assess the nature of diachronic transformations of theology.

And I think there's another thing that we can say. Because God doesn't lie and he cannot deny himself, his commands in one situation do not contradict his commands, his expectations, the revelations of fact that he gives in another situation. This is a problem because theologians, especially biblical scholars, tend to use the word contradict in a very non-technical way. If something looks like it's saying something different than what was said before, then they say, "Ah! You see? A contradiction." I mean even evangelicals are doing this now, unfortunately, that God contradicts himself in later revelation from what he gave in earlier revelation. But we have to remember that a contradiction is when you say that something can be and not be in the same time and in the same sense. We might even add the word place, saying time, place, and sense. So when you find for example that in the book of Ezra the people are called to divorce their pagan wives, but you find in the book of Esther that Esther is a heroine because she marries a pagan. Now this is about the same time, but it's in a different place. She's over in Susa and they're in the Promised Land. And there's a different sense also, because the reason behind the commands in the Promised Land with Ezra and Nehemiah was because the people of God were being corrupted by these intermarriages, and Esther's intermarriage with a pagan was designed to actually save the people of God. So you have all kinds of differences.

So it's not a bold, logical contradiction, nor is it a bold, logical contradiction to say that God commanded that we sacrifice animals in the Old Testament, but now we'd better not do that anymore. That's not a contradiction either, because the command for sacrificing animals was designed by God as a temporary measure for the place and the condition of the people of God at that time, and that's what his later revelation tells us. And so the Bible's commands and information don't contradict each other just because they're different. Things can be different, things can grow, things can

develop without being contradictory of each other, and that is a very important thing. So the character of God and the importance of this idea that the Bible itself limits how much change we should expect, but also that we know that God will not lie, he will not contradict himself in that sense.

Question 6:
How do we reconcile God's sovereignty with theological development in the Bible?

Student: Now Richard, if God is sovereign, how do we reconcile that with development in theology in the Bible?

Dr. Pratt: Well, this gets us into a whole mess of issues that Christians disagree over. Let's start there. Let's just say, if you can think about it this way: There are Christians, and by that I mean people who do genuinely follow Christ, and they differ on the sovereignty of God over history and his control over history and how they work that all out. It ranges very broadly from what's called today "open theism" which in its extreme forms actually says that God doesn't know what's going to happen next, and so he's always reacting just as much as a human being might react to something. That would be an extreme form of open theism but it's out there. The other I guess extreme would be something like what we would call fatalism or a hyper-Calvinism that says that God is not actually involved in historical events. He's just fixed everything and just sits there and sort of watches it happen, and if he is involved, it's only the appearance of involvement, so there's no genuine involvement. And then you have everything in the middle, everything spread out this way, some tending more toward this side, some tending more toward that side. But let me just say it this way: No matter where a person comes down on how much of history is up to God's eternal plan or how much of it is still open under God's sovereignty, things like that, it's really a non-issue for us.

Now I personally believe God has planned everything, everything right down to the last detail; that's what I believe. And so then the question does come up, well if he planned it all and if he is doing everything the way he wanted it to be done, then why do things change? Why does theology change? And the answer for that is basically because God does not just simply have a plan for all of creation, but God is genuinely and really involved with his creation. It's not a fiction. And this is one of the problems that people in my branch of the church have. They think that somehow when the Bible talks about God answering prayer or God doing this and moving forward that way, and going this way, then going that way, that this is all a fiction. Sort of like the shadows on Plato's cave wall. It's not real. Well, that's not true. It's true that God is involved in history in his providence that much, that he actually interacts with events and reacts to events. That's what the Bible teaches. It's even what my own branch of the church teaches. And so there's a lot more in common in the middle ground among these different views than people often suspect.

So I think what we have to do is just everyone needs to affirm that the Bible does not just say that God is sovereign over everything and in control of everything in one way or another, which I think almost all Christians would say except for the extremes, but we also have to say that God is genuinely and really involved in the process of history as well, and the difference there is often put in terms of the first being his eternal decrees and the other being his providence. That's more or less a traditional way of distinguishing those. The eternal decrees are his sovereign control and his sovereign plan for everything, but his providence is his real and genuine, authentic involvement in history, down into the details of history.

And when we think of God having those kinds of involvements, you can categorize the kinds of developments that start taking place. You can be sure, for example, that every theological development that takes place in the Bible has an endpoint in mind. God had a plan for it, he's pushing things in that direction, in providence; he's moving things in that direction. Now why he moves this way, why he moves that way, why he does this, why he does that, we can't always be sure. So many of those things are secret. But sometimes we can make sense of it. God accommodates himself and his revelation to situations, and you look at them and you say, well that makes sense. I mean, we mentioned in the video that when God revealed himself to Moses during the wilderness wanderings, he told them build a tabernacle. And then later on when David takes Jerusalem and Solomon is established as the king, then God says forget the tabernacle, I want a permanent structure now. Well, that makes perfectly good sense to us. Even we can understand why that would be the case, because if God had said build a temple on Mt. Sinai, now go to Jerusalem, we'd have been in trouble, right? The temple would have been back there and we'd be going this way. Why would we want to leave the temple? So the tabernacle had to travel with them, and so that makes sense. Now once they're settled and the capital city is established and the people of God are centered around that capital city with a monarch and that sort of thing, it makes sense that he would then have a temple.

Sometimes the transformations that occur, the developments make sense even to us. Sometimes, however, they don't make a lot of sense to us. They almost seem — they're not actually, but seem — arbitrary. I think a great example of that is when you think about the holiness code in the book of Leviticus. You look at that and what you realize if you compare what Israel believed was holy and clean and unclean, those kinds of terms, and you can compare it now with Canaanite religions of various sorts — the worship of Baal and that sort of thing at Ugarit — when you compare the ceremonies, sometimes Israel's ceremonies are very much like the ceremonies of the pagans around them. So their ideas of what's holy and their ideas of what's clean and acceptable to God and what's not acceptable to God are very much like their pagan neighbors. And then, for no obvious reason, the opposite is true, that sometimes what's considered clean and holy or unclean is the opposite of what the people around them believed.

I'm sure you've seen the iconography of for example Babylonian and Assyrian and Egyptian kings, and many of them had beards, of course, but they were very well-

trimmed beards. Now in Israel, to square off your beard like an Assyrian was considered an abomination. That's why you see many orthodox Jews today with beards that are "out here." It's because you don't trim it like that. Why? Because it makes you look like a pagan. But then on the other hand, who was it that helped Solomon build the temple? Do you remember his name? Starts with an "H."

Student: Hiram

Dr. Pratt: That's right. And what nationality was he?

Student: Phoenician.

Dr. Pratt: Phoenician. And when you compare the structure of the temple in Jerusalem with the temples that we know from Phoenicia and other parts, you can see the similarities. In fact, the tabernacle of Baal at Ugarit had dolphin skins and latticework just like the tabernacle of Yahweh did. And so when you look at this, there's just no rhyme or reason for this. This is a secret thing that belongs to God, and Israel had to accept that certain things were going to be acceptable and certain things weren't, and you just did it because that's the way God said to do it, plain and simple.

Question 7:
Do theological developments ever occur simply because God changes his mind?

Student: So regarding the developments in theology, in some cases the developments make sense. In other cases we can't really make sense out of it. Is it safe to say — I don't know if I want to say this, but is God just sovereignly changing his mind on these things? Or can we assume that there is a purpose in everything?

Dr. Pratt: Well changing mind is a slippery expression among Christians. There are Bible verses like Numbers 23:19 that says he does not change or repent. And then there are other Bible verses that say he does repent, using the same Hebrew word "*nacham*", to change, or to relent, to change his mind. And so it all depends on what you mean by change his mind. Now, where I am believing that God is sovereign over everything and that he has a plan for everything, we believe — people in my tradition believe — that God does not change his plan. So in that sense, he doesn't change his mind. But does he change in his providence? In other words, does he say one thing and then say, okay, I won't do that. I'll do this instead? The answer is yes, all of the time. A great example of course is that famous passage in Exodus 32 where God says get out of the way, I'm going to destroy these people, they're stiff-necked, and I'll just make my nation out of you, Moses. And Moses prays and then verse 14 says, "And he relented from what he had" — as some translations put it — "planned to do", or "*asher hara'ah*", there meaning that he had thought about doing. And that's

not talking about his eternal plan. That's talking about his involvement in history, his providence.

So you do have the situations where you can understand why God does certain things like the tabernacle to the temple; you have situations where you sort of shake your head and go, well, okay, I'll just have to accept that he's God, I'm not, like the Israelites did with the clean and unclean and holy regulations. And then you have situations — now this is the really important one in my opinion because it's the one that people often forget about. You have situations where the theology of the Bible changes as God responds to the actions of people. Now if you think about that for just a minute, that's pretty important. The classic example of course is the example of Esther when God says if you step up and do your job then great, but if you don't, don't worry, God will just get someone else. In other words, the theology changes; it changes from Esther's the chosen one to do all of the rescuing of Israel to now we'll get someone else — "Thank you Esther, now you're out of the picture."

Another situation would be where God promises or offers to Israel all these wonderful, wonderful blessings that the house of David will reign and spread all over the world, and then by the time you get to the prophets you discover they have sinned so much and they refuse to repent of their sins so much that God decides to send them into exile. And at first, Jeremiah chapter 25 and 29 says that he's going to send them into exile for seventy years. But then Daniel chapter 9 says it's not just going to be seventy years, it's going to be seven times seventy years. And so you have all that kind of thing happening, because in his providence — not in his eternal plan, but in his providence — God actually genuinely does respond to people. When Jesus looked at Jerusalem in Matthew and he said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I would have gathered you like a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you would not", he is responding to the actions of the people of Jerusalem. And however you work that out with the sovereignty of God, which is what God is onto this, it's true that Jesus was offering Jerusalem his salvation, but because the rejected him, the program changed. And that's the way it is in the Bible through and through, because God genuinely is involved in providence. Without that, then diachronic transformation of theology in the Bible doesn't make any sense, because if God is not deeply involved in the course of history — which he is in the Bible — if he were not involved in the course of history, then it doesn't make sense for the theology of the Bible to be shifting one way and then shifting another as it moves toward that final goal that God's established.

Question 8:
Do all biblical theologians divide the Bible according to covenants?

Student: So Richard, do all biblical theologians divide the Bible the same way according to covenant?

Dr. Pratt: No. Now, every biblical theologian that I know of understands that there's an epochal quality to Bible history. In other words, periods of time tend to batch together as you go through the Bible, but they do it in different ways. Now, I emphasize covenant in large part because I believe that's what the Bible emphasizes, and I think it fits with the overarching destiny and the overarching coherence of the whole Bible. But you actually could divide the Bible any number of ways, into any number of periods. And we know that this is true because Bible writers themselves do. You know, I could ask you the question this way: How many ways can you slice a pie? And the answer is…?

Student: It depends on the pie.

Dr. Pratt: It depends on the size of the pie I guess, or how thin your knife is. But the answer in theory is every way you can possibly imagine, right? And that's the way it is with the history of the Bible. It's convenient to use covenants and I think very helpful to use covenants for many tasks but not for every task. So let me just give you the example of Peter and Paul. The apostle Paul divided the history of the Bible into two main periods much like most rabbis did in his day. He divided the history of the Bible between this age and the age to come, and by that he meant the time before Messiah and the time after Messiah. So history for him is in two stages. You can find that in Ephesians 1 and all through his writings.

Peter, however, in 2 Peter 3 divides the history of the Bible into three periods. He talks about that world before Noah's flood, then he talks about the present heavens and earth between Noah and now that we live in today, and then he talks about the new creation that's to come. So here are two apostles dividing the history of the Bible into different periods of time, or different epochal developments. And the fact that apostles are doing this with variety lets us know that we can do it with variety.

Now the question would be, so then how do you decide if one approach, one way of chopping up the pie, is better than another? And the answer in many respects is it all depends on what you're going after and what your goal is. It's not as if there is one way to do it that's appropriate for every goal that you might have as a teacher or as a pastor or as someone just studying the Bible on your own. Rather, it depends on what you're trying to emphasize and what you're trying to get out of the Bible as to how you chop it up into various periods of time. Peter, for example, believed that Noah was very important in the history of the Bible. And oddly enough, Paul never even mentions Noah. So Peter's propensity toward Noah made him have this threefold approach to the history of the Bible. Paul just relied on his rabbinic tradition and stuck with the two ages.

And so when we think about how to divide the Bible into epochs, you're not free to do just whatever you want, but rather you're looking for periods of time that have enough continuity, enough stability that you can say, okay, this period of time works together, and then this period of time works together, and then this period of time. But people will go at that in different ways, and I think covenant works best because

covenants are the ways in which God administers his kingdom coming to this planet, which I think is the theme of the whole Bible.

Question 9:
Besides matching epochs to covenants, how else do biblical theologians divide the Bible?

Student: Now can you give us other examples of other ways that biblical theologians divide?

Dr. Pratt: A number of critical biblical theologians divide the history of the Bible according to archeological categories: Middle Bronze, Late Bronze, Early Iron. They'll use those kinds of categories and they'll say, well, this was the religion of Israel in the Middle Bronze period, this was Israel's religion in the Late Bronze, this is Israel's religion in the early Iron Age, and so on and so on. And there's nothing utterly wrong with that, but it probably isn't biblical enough in that sense, because I don't think Bible people thought in terms of the great transitions of human civilization occurring with metallurgy and things like that. So I think there are more dramatic shifts that occur in Bible history than what an archeologist might give as a scheme or a grid for dividing up the Bible.

Others will divide according to other criteria that they have. One well-known biblical theologian sees the theme of the Bible as promise, the promise of God. In my opinion, that's a fine theme to be emphasizing, but it's not "the" theme of the Bible, not the comprehensive theme of the Bible. But if you believe it is, as he does, then what you're going to do is you're going to look for the promises of God, and then you tend to cut the Bible at the stages where those promises are given. And so it all depends on the criteria you use to segment history out, and it will have an effect on the way you understand the chronological developments, the diachronological developments, and we just have to be aware of that. I do propose that covenant is the best way to do it. I think it's more indigenous to the Bible itself and to the ancient Near East and those sorts of things. And I think when Jesus comes announcing that he and his religion is the religion of the new covenant, I think that that should give us a clue as to how we should be thinking about the Bible's history, too. But there's no absolutely correct way to do it.

Question 10:
Why did God establish so many covenants?

Student: Richard, why did God establish so many covenants in biblical history?

Dr. Pratt: Yes, you would think that if you got it right the first time, that's all he would need to do, right? So, why so many? That's a good question. I think that once

again the way God made covenants and established covenants in Bible history has a lot to do with this providential interaction that God has. Sometimes we can make sense of it, sometimes we can't. Sometimes it involves him responding to situations and that sort of thing. But I think the covenants of the Bible really do unfold in a way that we can understand. I don't think it's as difficult sometimes as people want to think of it.

Now traditional covenant theology is different than the kind of thing we're talking about now. Traditional covenant theology speaks of two covenants, the covenant of works with Adam before the fall, and then the covenant of grace that extended from the fall all the way to Christ and beyond to the second coming. That's not what we're talking about here. That's another whole way of approaching the theme of covenant. But what we're talking about is where the Bible actually gives us good evidence that there is a covenant being made between God and people at this point and at that point and at that point and at that point, and those points in biblical history are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Christ. Did I miss any? I don't think so. I think I got them all. Now what happens in each one of those is they are very similar to each other in many ways, but each one of them is also different from each other, because they have different emphases that are appropriate for what's going on at that time. That's the critical thing. God is not bringing up these covenant policies and covenant promises and those sorts of things willy-nilly. He's doing it as he's involved in history where it is at the time.

And so what you find is in the first three chapters of Genesis that the covenant that God makes with Adam emphasizes certain kinds of things, certain very basic things. I call it the covenant of foundations for that reason. That's just my term, but they're very basic. What is the world? What's a human being? What role do these things have with each other in service to God? I mean, it's so fundamental that that's the foundational covenant, as it were, with humanity.

Now the next big covenant of course is with Noah, and the thing that God emphasizes there is the way that nature is going to be stable — "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" — and that he's not going to destroy the world again with a flood every time things get bad. Well why did he do that? Well because he had just destroyed the world by a flood when things got bad. And he says I realize that people are sinful from the moment that they're born, and so if we're going to make this work, we're going to have to be patient. I'm creating this sphere of nature that's going to be stable so you can make mistakes and get up and go at it again, and make a mistake and get up and go at it again. And so he promises and emphasizes the stability of nature in Noah's covenant.

But then in Abraham's covenant, you have a major shift that happens, because it's at that time that God is choosing the nation of Israel to be his leading people, the ones who are going to lead the rest of humanity into the blessings of God, and so with Abraham, he's focusing on what's so special about Israel. What are they going to get out of this. What are their responsibilities in this. And so early on, right then when

God chooses Abraham, the covenant is appropriate for that action of God, establishing what this line of humanity is going to do and what its role is in the whole history of humanity. And we can see it played out even in our own day that Abraham's children are still very central in the whole history of humanity.

You move on to Moses, well, they're becoming a nation. They've left Egypt and there's a lot of them, and they're getting ready to set up a nation in their promised land, so naturally Moses' covenant is going to emphasize the laws of the nation, the laws that govern life among the people of God. And then as Israel grows into a legitimate, bona fide kingdom with a king and those kinds of things and the stability of kingdom is what is the concern, then God's covenant with David establishes his family as the permanent dynasty that will lead the rest of humanity in service to God in the future.

And then with Christ, of course Christ comes to remedy all sin, all failure, and he comes to establish the kingdom of God on earth perfectly and completely, and that's what that last covenant is about, the new covenant that the prophets predicted. So that's why God has so many. It's because his plan is unfolding piece by piece, bit by bit, moving toward that final goal, but at each step along the way, different direction needs to be taken, different administrations, different things need to be emphasized. And I think that is why he has so many rather than just one that he establishes forever.

Question 11:
What does the multiplicity of covenants teach us about God's character?

Student: So Richard, what does this multiplicity of covenant teach us about the character of God?

Dr. Pratt: I think it teaches us a lot of things. It teaches us that God is intending to fulfill his purposes, and he will do so, and that he moves history toward an end, a goal, an *eschaton*, and this is a reflection of God's character, that God is a self-glorifying God, and the way he is going to glorify himself on the earth is by fulfilling his purposes for the earth, and this he administers by means of covenants. I think it also says to us that God is very patient, that he works with people where they are; he does not treat the Israelites as if they lived in the New Testament period because they didn't. He treats them as they were needing at that time, and he's very wise in the way he unveils these things, telling Abraham what's going to be in the future, then Moses' laws, and then David as king. Of course those things are anticipated, but they're not built out and brought out fully. So I think we can learn the patience of God.

I think we can learn his love, his covenant love for his people. God has a people in this world that he's redeemed, and he's going to ensure that they're eternal destiny of

glory will occur, and the way he does that is by making these covenants work out step by step by step by step for the final purpose of the great reward for those that are his. So I think we can learn a lot about the character of God if we will take the time to look at covenants as his appropriate activity and his appropriate revelation for a particular time that then moves to another time and then moves to another time. So it's a wonderful thing. Covenants in the Bible really are very central, and I think they do help us understand the movement of Bible history.

Question 12:
Are there both conditional and unconditional covenants?

Student: Richard, I've heard it argued that some covenants are conditional and some covenants are unconditional. Could you explain that?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, there are lots of people that say that kind of thing, and we need to address it because in the lesson I'm emphasizing the idea that the covenants really are very similar to each other, at least in terms of their basic dynamics. And if that's correct, then what I'm saying is different from what a lot of people have said — not everyone, but a lot of people — have said and then what some people are even saying today. Now people in the past — I just have to put it this way — before 1950 or so when people talked about covenants, more or less their views of covenants were not very well informed from the world of the Bible, the world of the Old Testament.

After the 1950s and the 60s and 70s, discoveries were made of different kinds of archeological texts, ancient texts, Babylonian, Hittite, Assyrian texts, things like that, where archeologists were discovering that there were similarities between Bible covenants and these different ancient texts from these different cultures. And early on, when those discoveries were made and people began to decipher them, they started distinguishing between two different types of ancient Near Eastern texts. On the one side, they talked about what they called suzerain-vassal treaties, which means basically an imperial treaty with a subordinate, and they described those suzerain-vassal treaties correctly by saying that they were very conditional, that blessings were offered to people, but if they disobeyed or rebelled against their emperor, well, then they wouldn't get those blessings, they'd get very serious curses.

At the same time, in the early stages of deciphering those documents, another group was discovered and identified that are often called royal land grants, royal grants shall we say because there were different kinds of grants that were made. Now in the early analyses of these royal grants, the assumption was that there were no conditions attached. The suzerain-vassal treaties, yes, they had conditions, but the royal grants had no conditions. This was the way people thought probably about until 1989 or so. And the reason for this was because, unfortunately, sometimes people who are archeologists and even theologians, sometimes lose common sense when they read the Bible and when they study the ancient Near East. Okay? So imagine this situation.

Imagine a king, an emperor grants some property to someone and that person rebels against the king who had given him that property. What do you think the king would do?

Student: He's going back. He's getting his property back.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. He gets his property back as well as kill the man, and those sorts of things, right? Now, does that have to be written down in a document for you to know that that's true?

Student: The king is supreme.

Dr. Pratt: That's right, king is supreme. So these grants from the kings and from superiors to their inferiors often do not have explicit conditions. Now some of them do. Some of them actually have conditions attached to them, but often they don't because they're grandiose, they're wonderful, they're magnificent — "Oh, you're such a good man, you've helped me in so many ways, and I'll give you this land for you and for your children and for their children and their children." But you'd better believe that if the subordinate rebels against the great king, the great king is going to say, "Did I say forever? Forget that, it's my land now."

Student: So you're saying the conditions are implied?

Dr. Pratt: Conditions are implied simply because of the relationship between the king and his subject. When you go to a marriage, when the couple make their vows and those sorts of things, you know, "to have and to hold from this day forward, till death do us part", those kinds of things, they don't stick in all the conditions that are implied in the wedding ceremony. They don't stand up there and say to each other — maybe some people do this but normally this is not what happens — they don't say, "Now I'll do all that so long as you are faithful to me," or "so long as you take care of all these things that you're supposed to take care of. And if you don't, then forget this marriage, we're going to get a divorce." You don't do that because it's not appropriate for the celebrative feeling of what's going on at that time. That's the way royal grants were. You didn't emphasize all the things that might ruin the association, ruin the grant and make it reversible, because that wasn't the nature of the gift.

Alright now, the suzerain-vassal treaties were of that nature. They were legal documents between one nation and another spelling out the responsibilities of each side. Now when people early on made this sharp distinction between royal grants and suzerain-vassal treaties, they started associating those two kinds of documents with the covenants of the Bible. And so what they did was they started looking at the covenants of the Bible and they would say — in different ways because there was not any agreement on exactly how to do this — well, these covenants look like a suzerain-vassal treaty, but these Bible covenants look like a royal grant. And so of course early on, again, these are conditional, and these are unconditional.

And again that's why I say we're losing common sense again, because you're dealing with God here, and you're dealing with the servants of God, and when God says I'm going to do this for you, he doesn't have to say unless, unless, unless, unless because that's implied in the very relationship that we have with God. I often think about it this way. I mean, imagine you have a son who is 13 years old, and it's the first day you're going to take him to the shopping mall, and you're going to let him go on his own. And you say to him, "Okay, son, have a great time," and he gets out of the car and he goes into the mall. He's all alone with his friends, and you get a call from the police an hour later saying your son's at the police station because he's been shoplifting. And you go pick up your son and you say, "Son, what were you thinking?" And he looks at you and he says, "Well Dad, you told me to have a good time. I was only doing what you told me to do." Now what would you say to him?

Student: You're out of your mind.

Dr. Pratt: You're out of your mind, yeah. Give me a little more information of what you might say. You have a son, what would you say to him?

Student: I would tell him he understood that there were bounds to "have a good time."

Dr. Pratt: "You know that I do not mean shoplifting when I said have a good time," right? That's the way it is with covenants. Covenants don't float in midair without any context. Agreements between God and people, the solemn organization of rules and regulations, do not float in the air. We know from the rest of Scripture that God expects his people to live in certain ways, and if they don't, there are going to be consequences. And just like you when you let your son out at the mall and you said, "Have a good time," you didn't have to tell him, "but don't you shoplift." God doesn't have to say all the "buts" either, all the "unless, unless, unless, unless" every time he says anything. You don't have to repeat everything every time you talk to your child. If you do, you'll never say anything because there's a lot to repeat. Well, the same thing is true with biblical covenants. They cannot and do not repeat all the conditions that have already been set up by prior revelation from God to his people.

So when you start thinking about the covenants of the Bible, rather than saying well these are like the suzerain-vassal treaties and these are like the royal grants, conditional and unconditional, what we need to do is use a little Bible common sense here and realize that it's all from God, and it's all involving inferiors of God, his servants, and that sets up a basic, fundamental relationship that is true whether a particular Bible chapter or a particular biblical passage says anything about conditions or not. See, that's very important, because there is always a conditionality to any relationship that we have with the Creator of the universe. He expects us to live in certain ways and to respond in certain ways to his mercy and to his grace, and if you don't, then you're proving the true condition of your heart and you're not going to be receiving his blessings. It's really that simple. Even Jesus says that: You have to believe in me, and you have to follow me, and you have to take up your cross and

follow me, or just sit back and forget this; you have to count the cost if you're going to follow me. Well see, that's a condition that Jesus is putting on his followers. And so this is the way biblical religion works, and the covenants don't violate that. So I just think it's wrong to say that certain covenants are conditional and others are unconditional.

Question 13:
Are some covenants more conditional than others?

Student: So Richard, you are saying that there are no sharp distinctions between the covenants in the Bible. Would you say some are more conditional than others are?

Dr. Pratt: I think that's fair to say. I think it's fair to say, at least in this sense, that some of the covenants of the Bible spell out conditions more than others do, yes, that they emphasize conditionality more. For example, I mean, who could disagree that the many, many rules and then punishments for violations of rules that are in the Mosaic Law obviously stress the conditionality of this: If you do these commands then you'll be blessed, if you don't do these commands, you'll be cursed. I mean, there's a great deal of emphasis in the Law of Moses on this. But at the same time when people start talking about, for example, the Abrahamic covenant as unconditional, what they usually refer to is Genesis 15 which is the time when God appeared to Abraham in a dream and God moves as smoke and fire among the pieces of meat, the carnage of the animals that Abraham had cut up, and then God makes covenant with him. Well there's no mention explicitly of any conditions there, and so people say, you see, that's like a royal grant. Well the problem with that is that we don't just have Genesis 15 for Abraham's covenant. God comes back to Abraham in chapter 17 and he says I'm now going to confirm my covenant with you, walk before me and be blameless. And then he says in chapter 17 to Abraham, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants, and here is how you do this — through circumcision. So circumcision, of course, for Israel represented fidelity to the law, commitment to the law. So Abraham's covenant is not just one-sided. It's given in two different places with two different emphases, one on the kindness and mercy and benevolence of God, chapter 15, but chapter 17 emphasizes the responsibility that Abraham and his descendants had in the Abrahamic covenant.

And so even this most unconditional covenant, as many will talk about Abraham's covenant, actually has plenty of conditions. I mean, we don't know for a fact, but we can speculate a bit here and ask the question, what would have happened if God said to Abraham, "Sacrifice your son to me," and Abraham said, "No, I'm not going to do that. I don't love you move than I love my son." There might have been some negative consequences of that. Yes? Fair to say? Okay, so there is conditionality involved even in Abraham's own life much less in Isaac's and Jacob's and Joseph's, prior to Moses. So the relationship that the covenants of 15 and 17, this one covenant that's initiated in 15 and ratified or confirmed in 17 of Genesis, this one covenant has

conditionality in it. And the same would be true even of Noah. I mean, there is no emphasis on the conditions of Noah's covenant, but as soon as God tells that he's going to make covenant with Noah — "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" — the next thing he says to Noah is be fruitful and multiple. There's a responsibility Noah has. And he goes on to say that if someone murders someone else, then his life must be taken. And don't eat unclean animals. All these kinds of things go on. And so there are always conditions associated even if they're not emphasized, although some do emphasize conditions more than others.

Question 14:
Is the new covenant conditional?

Student: So now you're saying that all covenants are conditional. That makes me a little nervous. Are we also saying that the new covenant is a conditional covenant?

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question, because that's what should bother us as Christians, because we're told that the new covenant is the covenant where God will just take care of sin, wipe it out, remove it as far as the east is from the west, and he'll make all things new, and it'll be a wonderful thing, you know, you'll never have any troubles anymore once the new covenant comes into effect. Well, there is a sense of course in which then the new covenant represents a special cataclysmic intervention of God after Israelites exile that will bring about the rectifying of all evil. It will bring about the redemption of all of creation; all of God's people will enjoy the creation forever with him and honor him and those sorts of things. And it is secured by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus fulfilled every condition that could ever be laid on humanity for the reward of eternal life, and the new covenant draws our attention to him and says if you trust in him and you have saving faith in him, you will enjoy the benefits of the covenant forever, the new covenant which is the culmination of them all.

So having said that, there's this unconditionality that's associated with the new covenant, let me back up and say the same kind of thing is true for the other covenants. Everything that's talked about at the various covenants of the Bible had this unconditional quality that God is going to bring about certain things through this covenant relationship. For example, he established Adam and Eve as his image, he was going to fill up the whole world and bring the kingdom of God to the planet. Well, that did not fail even though sin occurred and certain descendants of Adam and Eve are out of the picture, it will not fail, because the seed of the woman will have victory over the seed of the serpent. God did a similar thing in Abraham's day. He made all these big promises to Israel. Well, that will not fail. In one way or another, God was going to bring that about. But now the specific descendants of Abraham, now that's another story, whether they get to participate or not. The same thing with the kingdom of David and his dynastic promise. Yes, the house of David will reign

forever over all the earth and will never fail to be so, but that had nothing to say about the specific individual sons of David, many of whom were not the best kings in the world and did not suffer inappropriately for their crimes.

And so while we would say that there is this unconditional quality that every covenant will move history forward to the next step, to the next step, here's Jesus' covenant, the last step of history. So yes, he takes us without fail to the last step of history. But now here's the question. Has the new covenant come in its fullness yet?

Student: No, not until the consummation of….

Dr. Pratt: That's right, not until the new heavens and new earth. So I can ask you right now — let's assume that all three of us are true Christians and we really have given our hearts to Christ and we really are exercising saving faith in him — have our sins been forgiven?

Students: Yes.

Dr. Pratt: Why then do you pray for forgiveness of your sins every day?

Student: I'm not sure.

Dr. Pratt: Well, the Bible tells you to for one thing. Right? So why do we do that? Well it's because, yes, our sins have been forgiven, but we're now living life prior to the final open vindication when Jesus comes back, and the final judgment has not been rendered yet. So we must continue to live in this sort of in-between time where the new covenant has started but it has not been completed. You won't be confessing sins in the new heavens and new earth because you won't do any. And the new covenant promises that you won't have anyone who will have to teach you or tell you to know the Lord because they will all know me from the least to the greatest, in Jeremiah 31.

And so there is this conditionality in the New Testament faith, the new covenant faith, not that people can lose true salvation that's given to them by Christ, but that they can demonstrate by their lives that they have not had saving faith. And that's why the New Testament constantly tells Christians and people in the visible church, be careful, watch our what you do — "Do not be mocked, God is not deceived; whatever a man sows, that he shall also reap" in the book of Galatians, which is supposedly the most unconditional book in the New Testament, right? There it is: "Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. Whatever a man sows he shall also reap." And so if you sow to the flesh, you will reap destruction. If you sow to the spirit, you will reap eternal life. Well that's conditionality. It sounds like Moses, blessing and cursing, because it is like Moses, blessing and cursing in the new covenant. But what this assumes is that people who have saving faith in Christ, receive the Holy Spirit, and they are justified by God in the heavenly court, they receive the Holy Spirit, they are sealed by the Holy Spirit and kept until the day of judgment, kept safe. But there are

lots of people who join into this who are not justified and who are not sealed by Holy Spirit, and they come out in the process. They come out in the wash as it were.

My favorite verse, I guess, in the New Testament, many times anyway in this regard is 1 John 2:19: "They went out from us because they were not of us; if they had been of us, they would not have gone out from us. But they went out from us so it might be clear that they were not of us." There's a lot of doubletalk there, but you understand the idea. People look like, act like, talk like they're Christians, and then suddenly they no longer do, and they leave the faith. What does this mean? It means that they never really were of us, because if they had been, they would have stayed with us. But they went out from us to demonstrate that they were not of us. That's the conditionality of the new covenant. And until Jesus comes back and fixes all things and brings the final state of all things, we will continue to have that kind conditionality in our covenant life with God even in the new covenant.

Question 15:
How do we fulfill our covenant obligations under the new covenant?

Student: So then how do we as believers fulfill our covenant obligations under the new covenant?

Dr. Pratt: By sincerely giving ourselves in trust and devotion to Christ; that's the first thing, because it's not a matter of external works primarily. It's a matter of the mouth and of the heart. Remember how Paul says that in Romans 10? You confess with your mouth, you believe in your heart. Well, he gets that idea of loyalty to God being in the mouth and the heart from Deuteronomy chapter 30. He's quoting Deuteronomy 30 when he says that. So he's saying my new covenant faith corresponds to the mosaic covenant faith. And so it's not fundamentally different. Loyalty to God is not perfection. Loyalty to God is a matter of your confessing of your sins and confessing of the truth of God, and it is a matter of your heart commitment. Nobody is perfect in this life, but when the Holy Spirit indwells someone, their hearts are given over to loyalty to God, and though they will fail and go up and down, deep within their souls there's a love and a commitment to Christ that does not die.

And so we fulfill our obligations to covenant, the conditions of the new covenant, by our basic trust and dependence and love for Christ, but then as we grow in Christ and as Holy Spirit sanctifies us, we bear the fruit of the Spirit. When we are walking by the Spirit and keeping in step with the Spirit, then good fruit comes from this. Some people do better at that than others, and sometimes we do better at certain times than at other times, and in certain areas than in other areas. I mean, let's just face it, it's a very complicated, messy thing, but God can see our hearts, and that's what important. And if our hearts are given over to God, then we know that we are his and we are sealed forever.

Question 16:
What is the difference between epochal and topical development?

Student: Now when we are looking at the Bible, what is the difference between epochal and topical development?

Dr. Pratt: Good. I think that is an important one, because biblical theologians will go both ways when they are doing diachronic assessments of the Bible and how its theology develops. If you can just think of it this way, the epochal approach and topical approaches work together, because all these things always depend on each other, forming webs of multiple reciprocities as you recall. But an epochal approach basically tries to take a period of time as a whole and then compare that to the next or a future period of time as a whole. So you'll talk about what was going on here and how things shifted on the whole this way in this time, and then how things this way, how they developed that way, and you're taking these epochs and the systems as a whole in each epoch and comparing them and their development along the way.

A topical approach, which is a lot easier to do, is basically you take a piece of an epoch and then you trace how that piece correlates to other pieces later on. So you might take the question of worship, that topic, and you see how worship was done in the days of Abraham, how it was done in the days of Moses, you do it in the days of David, you do it in the days of Christ, and you try to explain those diachronic develops rather than the whole package wrapping up and then moving to the whole package which is more of an epochal approach. So both epochal and topical use each other, but it's a narrowing down of the focus.

A lot of times in early biblical theology, the assumption was that the categories of systematic theology identified the topics. And so you'll find even today some biblical theologians who are basically doing systematic theology but they just do it diachronically. So they'll say what's the doctrine of God? And you look at the doctrine of God as it develops through the Bible. What's the doctrine of humanity? And you look at its development. What's the doctrine of the people of God, the church? And you see its development, and so on and so on. So they'll use the same categories and just trace those through the Bible. That was early on in biblical theology, but again people still do that today in large part because systematic theology has had such an influence on us that it's hard for us to think about the Bible in any other way. Now let's face it, when you think about the Bible, it's different for you to talk much about it without putting God up front. And so just go ahead and do it, but this time trace it this way rather than just taking the final picture, which is what traditional systematics tends to do, the final picture rather than tracing the developments of the themes. So it's an approach that really does work well. There are books that are written on things like the worship of God in the Bible and they'll just trace how it goes. There are whole books written on subjects like the doctrine of humanity and trace the whole thing through. And so it works very well.

Question 17:
What are the dangers of a topical approach to Scripture?

Student: It seems that doing a topical approach, though, you would approach the danger of trying to force a topic into a passage, or actually you're missing what a passage is really trying to speak about.

Dr. Pratt: You can. You can, and in fact that's the accusation that biblical theologians often have against systematicians. You see, the systematician is bringing foreign ideas — Hellenistic ideas, remember, from Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism, and in the modern ideas — to the Bible. The wrong questions are being asked. Of course you're going to get certain answers if you ask the wrong questions. So the biblical theological movement is designed, at least it's ideally designed, to allow questions that are more indigenous to the Bible itself, that they're not exogenous. They don't come from the outside, but they are within the Bible and they're raised by the Bible's own theological patterns or theological structures.

And that, of course, is the great challenge. How do you do that? What are those patterns? Now, of course you know in this lesson I'm suggesting that as we did in the earlier lesson that one of the patterns we must constantly remind ourselves of is covenant, that every part of the Bible is going to talk about God's benevolence, every part of the Bible is going to talk about human loyalty, and every part of the Bible is going to talk about the consequences of blessings and curses. And just that framework, which I think is a little more indigenous to the times of the Bible as well as the Bible itself rather than Neo-Platonist questions about the relation of body and soul and things like that, I think that will really help us grasp how various topics develop in the Bible. Because if you take an idea like blessing, if you take that as your topic and you keep it within the covenant framework, you will see that different kinds of blessings are offered to different kinds of people through the history of the Bible. And of course the ultimate blessing is eternal life in the new heavens and new earth with Christ, and all these other blessings are just sort of preludes to that. So you could do curses the same way, you could do the kindness of God because he shows his benevolence in different ways, and you can show the requirements of human loyalty shift and change as each age goes by. And you could even narrow it down to just take a piece of that, just a piece of each one of those ideas of covenant. And so I think there are lots of ways to approach it, and that's where biblical theology is pushing the edge even at this point, and that is to try to organize a theological assessment of the Bible that fits with the Bible itself. And we're trying to do that in this lesson by offering covenant as one of the ways to do that. But it's not the only way.

Question 18:
What is the proper way to use typology in studies of Scripture?

Student: Richard, let's talk about typology. It seems like there's a lot of that going on, in some cases out of control. Is there a proper way we can utilize typology when we're studying Scripture?

Dr. Pratt: You're right, there is a lot of confusion about typology, in my opinion, because people know that they're supposed to be thinking this way, and there's a lot of emphasis now, especially as people are trying to teach and preach more from the Old Testament, to use typology as the way to get from the Old Testament to the New Testament. And so they will often do what I call "leprechaun Christology." You know how if you catch the leprechaun you get the pot of gold, but you can never really see them. Somebody says, "There's a leprechaun," and you try to catch him, but if you catch him, you get it. And by that I mean simply that the belief is that Jesus is somehow hidden behind walls and trees and bushes in the Old Testament and that you just have to accept that these comes more or less at random. I don't think it's quite as random as people often think it is. I think, rather, that what we are doing when we say that you take it ad hoc here, ad hoc there, you know, this is a type of Christ, that's a type of Christ, so on and so on, that what we're doing is shortcutting the hard work that it may take to understand the theological reasoning behind the typologies, for instance, that we find in the New Testament.

I think you can make sense out of most of them, and we need to work hard at trying to do that, even if we can't. And if we can make sense out of how New Testament writers fought through typologies, then we can find ways to manage, control methods that can guide what we try to do, what we should do. A lot of people are afraid of that because they believe that the New Testament writers were just sort of willy-nilly, spotting Jesus any way they could in the Old Testament, and you don't want to do that now because you're not inspired. They had special insight and were able to do it because they were inspired. I don't think that's the best approach. I can understand that because in the sense that when we don't get what New Testament writers are saying, we still have to accept what they're saying. If we can't make sense of it, you still accept it. But I think we can make sense out of a lot of the moves that they make theologically as they go through these typologies that bring them to Christ, bring Old Testament things into the Christian faith, and I just think we have to work at it a little bit harder than we normally do.

Question 19:
Is it always necessary to look for types of Christ when we study the Old Testament?

Student: So are you saying it is not always necessary to find types of Christ in the Old Testament?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's a good question, because a lot of people will tell you that unless you openly and explicitly in a sermon or in a lesson take an Old Testament theme and then relate it to Christ in some kind of specific typology, that you're not teaching or preaching as a Christian anymore. Okay? I mean, it used to be said in circles where I hung around that you could preach that sermon in a synagogue and not in a Christian church because you don't take it straight to Jesus. Now, here's what I would say in response to that idea: We have to look at the Old Testament as Christians, which means that we take the theological structures of the Old Testament and we realize that they have been transformed or developed by the theology of the New Testament. So we take Old Testament faith and we apply it to ourselves by running it into and running it through and filtering it through the teachings of the New Testament. But the teachings of the New Testament are about more than just Jesus. That's the key here.

It's fascinating, really, in some respects that often when people do what they call Christocentric teaching or Christocentric preaching, that kind of thing, that they will relate Old Testament themes to Jesus or to Christ, but normally they only think about Jesus in his first coming when they do this and typically just as death and sometimes as resurrection, they don't relate it to his birth, his teaching ministry. They don't relate it to his ascension into heaven or his return in glory, or to his body, the church. I mean, the tendency is to be just very pinpoint on the death and resurrection of Jesus rather than realizing all of this New Testament teaching about the birth, life, death, resurrection of Jesus, ascension of Jesus, the church growing as his body filled with the Spirit, and then the return of Christ in the new heavens and earth. All those things are one big package for New Testament writers, and so you do relate Old Testament themes to Christ when you bring them into the context of the whole of the teaching of the New Testament, because all of that comes from him. It is the result of his work and it's the religion that he proclaimed, it's the faith he proclaimed, the end time or eschatological version of Old Testament faith. That's what it was.

And so we have to get out of this mode of thinking that typology is like a single thread that points right to this thing that Jesus did, because often when we do that, we are searching diligently to find some little golden thread that can take us to Jesus, but often rather than being a single thread, it's more like a tidal wave that's moving from the Old Testament, and it's echoing and building and growing, and it smashes into its climax in the whole of the Christian faith rather than just pinpoint into Jesus. And I think that's a better way to think about it for the most part. But it involves a whole lot more concentration on the theological methods that New Testament writers used as a whole rather than just on pinpoint comparisons.

Let me remind you of one thing we talked about in an earlier lesson. Remember how we said that you had to have word revelation with act revelation, and one reason for that was because acts revelations are radial in their significance? So you can think of an event as fireworks going off, Boom! and it goes in every direction. Well, if you have an Old Testament event and it explodes and it goes in every direction, and here

you have a Jesus event, something he did in his life, Boom! and it goes in every direction. Well you put these two things next to each other going in every direction, you're going to have crossover. They're going to hit each other. They're going to cross paths. And some of those paths will be significant, but some of those paths where they cross over will be coincidental. I mean, Jesus wore sandals, so did Moses. Now is Moses wearing sandals a type of Jesus because of this? No, that's just coincidental; people in Moses' day wore sandals, people in Jesus' day wore sandals. Now Moses was taking the people to the Promised Land. Jesus lived in the Promised Land. Now was that coincidental? No. You see, that has heavy theological significance. But because events are radial, they will cross each other in many different ways, and we mustn't focus on the tiny little coincidental details that connect and act as if this is theologically significant when it isn't. The fact Jesus had two hands does not make him the fulfillment of every other person that had two hands. Or that he had a head, or that he drank water, those kinds of things. This is something people do. And so we have to look not for coincidental connections that come from the fact that all events are radial, but rather, we need to look at theologically significant connections.

Question 20:
Is a type a figure of speech?

Student: Now this is important. You're different categories of typologies. I want to go through each one of these. How is a type a figure of speech to begin with?

Dr. Pratt: Well, people have approached typologies in different ways. They usually think in terms of types being a comparison of events or sort of objective things, and that's fine because that's true. But in trying to get into this, I thought a good way to deal with it — and it's not the only way to — but a good way to deal with it is to sort of recognize that on a literary level when you're reading a text that's displaying types or talking about the types, that what you have there basically is a figure of speech, a particular kind of figure of speech. The category would be a figure of comparison. Now you know there are lots of those. Metaphors are figures of comparison where you compare one thing to another, a simile is a figure of comparison, an analogy is a figure of comparison, and so on and so on. Because that's what's being said fundamentally is a type is a comparison of one thing to another.

Now in biblical faith that means usually an earlier thing to a later thing, but nevertheless it's a comparison. And any time you have a figure of comparison, it's just important to realize the way they work, because this gets it right down to the bottom line here, and it really simplifies things if you can just get these categories. You have the thing that is being compared, and then you have the other thing to which it is being compared, and then you have the comparisons of those two things. So if I say the rain is like pennies falling from heaven. Now what are we saying? We're saying here that the real thing we're talking about is the rain. We're comparing

it with the pennies but what's the point of comparison? Well one is that they're falling out of the sky, or they're coming from heaven. They're gifts that are good. They're things that can enhance your life. There are all kinds of comparisons that are implied in that comparison between rain and pennies. But now here's what's wonderful about it, and that is that when people talk about figures of comparisons like similes and the like, metaphors and that sort of thing, they don't have to say all three pieces. They don't have to say explicitly the thing, the thing it's being compared to, and the points of comparison. They often expect people to understand those things. And so you don't just bring them all out explicitly.

A figure of speech does this on a very basic, normal level, and I think that that is what is fundamentally going on in a typology in the Bible. They're taking something, let's say from the Old Testament, and they are comparing it to the reality over here of something in the New Testament, and then they are having all these different points of comparison. Now one of the things that Aristotle said about metaphors is that they are inherently deceptive because metaphors are comparing things that are not alike, so you not only have points of comparison that they're like each other, but also differences. Now can you imagine that if you were doing a Bible typology, a biblical typology, you might mention one of those, you might mention two of those, but you don't always have to mention all three. And that's what's important to realize, that a typology is not all that difficult to understand if you realize that what you're doing is you have something in mind, you're comparing it to something else, and you have points of comparison that are either explicit or implied.

So if I were to say to you that the sun shining its light onto the earth is a type of Jesus, what would I be saying? I would be saying that the sun compares to Jesus, and Jesus is the reality that I'm comparing the sun to. So this is the real thing we're interested in learning about; it's not the sun. We're interested in learning about Jesus. So he's the real thing, we're comparing the sun to him, but then you would want to come up with certain kinds of points of comparison. What might some of those be?

Student: He gives life.

Dr. Pratt: Alright, he gives life like the sun gives life. What else might you say?

Student: Glory.

Dr. Pratt: He's glorious. Good, that's right. Those kinds of things. And that comparison is not magical because it's part of what we mean when we say God reveals himself in all things. So it isn't surprising then that Simeon says that Jesus is like the rising of the morning sun. This was a common metaphor in the days of the Bible. Every time — not every time, but many times — when kings would talk about their kingdoms coming, a new kingdom coming, a new king comes to the throne — they would compare it to the rising of the sun, that the period before was a period of darkness, now the sun is rising in the rising of the new king. Well, when you have that kind of common metaphorical use, royal metaphor, well, then it's no surprise at

all, is it, that someone who believes Jesus is the king bringing the kingdom of God will be compared to the rising of the sun. So you have these kinds of connections that go on all the time in the Bible, and fundamentally they are figures of speech with the three items of the thing that you're concerned with, the thing you're comparing it to, and the points of comparison, similarity and dissimilarity. That's fundamentally what I mean when I say that a type is a figure of speech.

Question 21:
What are the elements of a type?

Student: Now Richard, as it relates to typology, you mentioned that there are different kinds of elements. Can you explain those and talk about them?

Dr. Pratt: Remember when we say that a type is like a typology is like a figure of speech — you've got the thing, got the thing you're comparing it to, and the points of comparison — well, those are three different elements; we could call them, parts of a typology. It won't work without them. Now they don't have to be explicit, but they have to be there at least implicitly. Now it's very traditional for theologians to identify the pieces or the elements of typology in three categories: people/persons, institutions, — and just sort of a generic catchall — events that happen. Now when you say people, what you mean by that is things like God, human beings, angels, or personified animals, things like that. When you say institutions, you mean things like the monarchy, the temple, even significant real estate like the Promised Land, things like that. And when you say events, it would mean things like the opening up of the Red Sea because that's not an institutional thing; it doesn't happen over and over and over again. Or the flood in Noah's day, or a particular war like Jericho, that's not something that's institutionalized, and it's rather just, as it were, a generic event.

Now the idea is that when you look at examples in the New Testament of typologies, what they do is New Testament writers will compare different elements in different ways. They will sometimes compare people to people, sometimes they'll compare events to events, and sometimes institutions to institutions. That's the logical one. That's the one that sort of makes sense to us, okay? So you might say for example that Melchizedek, who is a person, is a type of Christ, who is a person, so person-to-person? Okay, I've got it. On the other hand, however, you might say that an institution, like the temple, let's say, is a type of the heavenly tabernacle in heaven right now. So the temple, the heavenly tabernacle, two institutions. You might also say generic events; that the flood in Noah's day looks like something that happens in the New Testament, whatever that might be. So it's just like you're just comparing events to events. But typically what happens in the New Testament is they don't follow that pattern of one-to-one, one-to-one, one-to-one, person-to-person, and then institution-to-institution, and event-to-event. What they do is they mix them, and the way they can do that is because persons, institutions and events are never separate from each other. There's always some connection among them, so they can draw

these things and weave these things together knowing that there will be points of comparison. Let me give you an example of that. If I were to say for example that you have Jesus being compared to the temple. Now, you've got the temple. What piece is that? What element is that? An institution. And what is Jesus?

Student: A person.

Dr. Pratt: A person. Now how in the world can you say that Jesus is the temple? He's a person, not an institution. Well the way you do that is you realize that Jesus has the office of the high priest, the great high priest of the ceremonies and the rituals of the heavenly tabernacle that replace the old institution of the old temple. And so as the high priest he is — the word was synecdoche, which means a part standing for the whole — he was the synecdoche of the whole thing. So Jesus as the high priest is sort of like the central point, the central person in the whole operation of the heavenly tabernacle, sacrificing his own blood, ministering before God the Father, all those kinds of things. And so this is how the New Testament can say that Jesus is the temple. But then it also helps us understand how the New Testament can also say without contradicting itself that the church is the temple. See, this is the key, that the body of Christ is spiritual stones being built upon each other to create a temple for the worship of God on the earth. Well, why is that? Well because the institution of the church and the people involved in it look a lot like the kinds of things that went on in the temple in the Old Testament. So which is it? Is it that Jesus is the fulfillment of the typology of the temple? Or is it the church? Which is it?

Student: Both.

Dr. Pratt: And we can say that because we have the Spirit of Christ in us, we are joined to him, we are one with him. So can you see how all these things kind of mingle together here and twist and turn and form webs of multiple reciprocities? Okay. But let's go a step further. The apostle Paul doesn't just affirm that Jesus is the temple as John does. He doesn't just affirm that the church is the temple of God, but he also says your body, your individual body is the temple of Holy Spirit. So now which is it? Is it Christ that is the fulfillment of the temple? Is it that the church is the fulfillment of the temple? Or that your body is the fulfillment of the temple?

Student: All of them.

Student: All the above.

Dr. Pratt: Okay. And how is that possible? It's because we are indwelt by Holy Spirit, joined to Christ who is the great High Priest who is the central figure in the heavenly tabernacle, which is the fulfillment of the institution of the temple in the old. Does that make sense? And so Paul is able to say that your physical body is the body of Christ on this earth. He actually says that you know in 1 Corinthians 6. And so we must realize then that a typology — and this sort of goes against the Christocentric notion — the typology is not just fulfilled in Jesus. It's fulfilled in Jesus as a

synecdoche of something much more complex than that which is the heavenly tabernacle and the people of God joined to him in service and worship to God. And so as these various elements come up, they don't come up separately, they don't come up individualized or isolated from each other, but there's this whole complex of interconnection that's assumed by New Testament writers that then allows them to say explicitly just this and that. And that's the kind of complex theological arrangement or theological structuring that we have to become aware of so we can handle and then even go beyond them in expressing the typologies of the Bible.

Question 21:
How do types depend on and reflect theological development?

Student: Okay, so we've covered figures of speech, a variety of developments, and you touched briefly on theological structures. Can you speak to the theological developments?

Dr. Pratt: I think it's really important to get that. Fundamentally, types are figures of speech. At least it's helpful to think of them that way. That means that there are different elements that are compared to each other in a variety of ways, and that the comparisons rest on or grow out of complex theological structures that the New Testament finds in the Old, and that the comparisons are birthed out of those complex structures. But the fourth element here, or the fourth piece or characteristic of a type in the Bible is that there has always been some theological development between the type and the antitype, the type and its fulfillment, the precursor and the endpoint.

So let's talk a little bit about what we mean by theological development because I think that's important. I think that what becomes important about this is the way people think about the development of theology which is largely a function of the way they think about theological ideas. It's really unfortunate, but most people when they think about theological ideas, they think of them as if they are wooden blocks that are separate from other ideas. So you have this theological idea, that one, that one, that one, and you've got a Bible that's laying out these theological ideas, separate ideas, in rows on top of each other as it goes down its path from Genesis to Revelation.

Now when you think that way about it, it's okay so long as you don't feel any tension between the lower levels, say the book of Genesis, and the upper level, say the book of Revelation. So as long as everything works together you're fine, you're building a solid wall, and we feel good about solid walls. But the problem is that when you look at the way that, say, Genesis and Exodus present theology and the you go ahead and allow the other layers to be laid up as the Bible progresses, you begin to see that some of the things that the upper rows say look like they don't really fit with what the lower rows said. We always use the example of the sacrifice of Isaac. It's crazy to think that Abraham's faith was exactly like ours. It's not true. Now it was

fundamentally, but not exactly like ours. And so we feel an incompatibility between what God asked Abraham to do and what we're being asked to do. The same thing with the sacrifices of the Old Testament. The same thing with the Promised Land of Israel. I mean, none of us are going on a plane over to Egypt to walk across to Sinai to get to the Promised Land like Israel was supposed to. In fact, if you did that we'd think you were crazy.

So how in the world then do you deal with it when you've got these rows of blocks like this and there's this tension between the upper levels and the lower levels? Well typically what Christians do is they'll leave the lower levels alone except where those tension points come, and when the tension comes then they'll pull the lower level block out and they'll say, "Well that's irrelevant now, or that's irrelevant now, or that's irrelevant now." And so the wall that they're constructing then begins to have holes in it, and of course you know what will happen eventually; it'll all come tumbling down, right?

See, that's not the way the Bible treats itself. The Bible doesn't treat itself by saying things like, well, just forget what they said about things back then. I mean it's sort of like when people say today, the common parlance is, "Well, that was just Old Testament." You would not have found a New Testament writer saying that. You would not have found Jesus saying that, because he said I did not come to get rid of the law. I mean, just forget that idea. Instead, what they did was they saw that their New Testament faith, the higher levels of those blocks, was actually built on and compatible with the lower levels. Now how did they do that when they weren't the same, obviously not the same? Well they didn't do what we do. They did not think of the ideas of the Bible, or theology, as wooden building blocks.

I think there's a better analogy that we can use. The block method is fine to some degree, but just realize every analogy is limited. But I think it's a lot better for us to think of ideas more along the lines of the ways we think of liquids mixing with each other. So you go to the early part of the Bible and let's say we have a glass beaker that has white paint poured into the bottom of it, and that would be like the beginning of the Bible, the first systems of theology that are coming out of the Pentateuch let's say. So we've got this system, it's white. Then you get a layer that's poured in; say it's a little beaker of blue. So what's going to happen is, of course, the blue is going to mix with the white. If you don't stir it too much, it will mix un-homogenously, unevenly. So we'll have some sections that are fairly white, some that are really dark blue, and then everywhere in between. That's the way theological ideas work. When you go from Abraham building alters all through the land of Canaan and then you pour in the blue paint of David saying now we're only going to worship in Jerusalem, he wasn't saying forget what Abraham did, he was saying this is a development from what Abraham did. Now why was it a development? Because it was moving Israel more and more toward an imperial structure, which was always the goal, always God's intention, because it was always his intention to build the kingdom. Okay? So you pour in this blue paint of now we're just going to worship Jerusalem and you die if you build alters anywhere else. I mean this is serious business here. So you can

understand some people wanting to say, "but wait a minute, we're doing it like Abraham did. Why are you going to kill us? We're just doing what Abraham did at Shechem. He had he alter her at Bethel. He had these altars everywhere. We should do this. David, you're wrong." But David had received revelation from God, and so the law now is only in Jerusalem, and he pours that in there, and he says to them we can learn from Abraham and what he did, but we're not to do exactly as Abraham did.

We mustn't imitate the earlier levels of revelation, but we mustn't forget them. Simple imitation will always lead to misapplication. You can bank on that, because more revelation has been given. And the same thing comes especially when you come to the New Testament where you get this yellow paint poured in, so some now is white, some is blue, some is all the shades of green, and you have some yellow in there, some things that are very strange in New Testament teaching compared to the old. And these things mix together in a variety of ways and affect each other rather than being building blocks that you have to get rid of because they don't fit with the later revelation.

And so that's the way typology works. You have to think of these ideas as much more fluid rather than thinking of them as simply building blocks. Well, I have the temple back here, there's one block. And now up here I've got Jesus. Now I can relate those two blocks to each other by comparison and that makes a type. Well it does, but the temple back here in the Old Testament was a part of a large system, and that large system is developed by further revelation that comes especially in the New Testament about the final sacrifice and about final atonement and how we've gone to new heights and all those sorts of things in Jesus's death and resurrection and now his participation in the heavenly tabernacle and then in the new world where there'll be no more sacrifices because we won't need any, it's all been done. So see, all of this is yellow paint being poured in, and that's how the typology can move then not just from this block, the temple to Jesus, but it can also move from the tabernacle, temple, to the church, to your body, to Jesus. It's because they're fluid and they mix together in all those varieties of ways.

And for this reason, types will never be exactly the same as their antitypes. That's necessary because theological developments have occurred between the type and the antitype. So when you read, for example, when Peter says that Noah's flood was a type of Christian baptism, would you have ever guessed that on your own? Probably not. You'd go, "Well that's okay Peter, I accept that." But the reason they look so dissimilar, going from one family in a boat with a bunch of animals to a person being baptized, the reason they're so dissimilar is because of all the theological paint that's been poured in in between Noah and Christian baptism. But the comparison of Noah to Christian baptism is not the only comparison that needs to be made, because it actually compares to other things, too, like the second coming of Jesus, like Jesus' own baptism. And all these things in New Testament theology are fluid and mix-and-match with each other too, and interact with each other. So you get this one typology then that's used by the New Testament in a variety of ways. So it's a lovely thing if

we can understand that theological development is much more the mixing of things rather than the laying on of one layer on top of another on top of another.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is the President and founder of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including Pray with Your Eyes Open, Every Thought Captive, Designed for Dignity, He Gave Us Stories, Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles and Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians.

Building Biblical Theology

LESSON FOUR

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Building Biblical Theology

Lesson Four

Contours of New Testament Biblical Theology

INTRODUCTION

I have a friend who bought an old book from a used bookstore to read on a long trip. He told me that for more than a week the tattered novel in his hands was his close traveling companion; he just couldn't put it down. I told my friend that he must really have liked the book. And he replied, "Yes, I loved it, but when I turned to the last page, I found out that someone had torn out the last page. I was so disappointed," he said, "because it wasn't till I came home and bought a new copy that I found out how the story ended." I suppose it is dissatisfying to take the time to read a good novel only to find that the last page is missing.

And in many respects, the same kind of thing is true with the Bible. We can benefit from reading the early parts of the Bible without knowing how it ends. But if we do not also study the ending of the Bible, the New Testament, it's like never reading the last page of a novel. The Old Testament raises questions, problems, and hopes, but the answers, resolutions and fulfillments appear at the end of the Scriptures, in the New Testament.

This is the fourth lesson in our series, *Building Biblical Theology.* We've entitled this lesson, "Contours of New Testament Biblical Theology." And in this lesson, we'll see some of the essential features of biblical theology toward the end of the story of Scripture, the culmination of God's revelation in the New Testament.

We should take a moment to review what we've seen in this series. We've noted that Christians have tended to follow three main strategies toward exegesis, or interpretation, of Scripture: literary analysis, looking at the Bible as a literary portrait designed to emphasize certain theological perspectives; thematic analysis, looking at the Bible as a mirror that reflects our traditional and contemporary interests and questions; and historical analysis, looking at the Bible as a window to the historical events that it describes. We always use all three of these approaches to some extent when we read the Scriptures, but the discipline of biblical theology treats the Bible primarily as a window, focusing on the historical analysis of Scriptures, looking especially at the ways God was involved in historical events reported in the Bible. For this reason, we defined the discipline of biblical theology in this way:

> Biblical theology is theological reflection drawn from historical analysis of acts of God reported in Scripture.

Biblical theology focuses on Scriptural accounts of what God has done in history and draws inferences for Christian theology from those events.

In the last two lessons of this series, we looked at the ways biblical theologians approach the Old Testament. In this lesson, we are concerned with the contours of biblical theology in the New Testament. As we will see, there are many similarities

between the ways biblical theology approaches both testaments, but there are also significant differences.

Our lesson will focus on three main issues. First, we'll gain an orientation toward our subject. Second, we'll look into the development of the Bible's teaching about eschatology, or the last days, a crucial issue in New Testament biblical theology. And third, we'll explore how biblical theologians have approached New Testament eschatology itself. Let's begin with a basic orientation toward our topic.

ORIENTATION

One of the best ways to get at the heart of New Testament biblical theology is to compare and contrast it with what we have learned in this series about biblical theology of the Old Testament. First, we'll look at the fact that Old Testament biblical theology and New Testament biblical theology have a mutual interest in God's twofold revelation. Second, we'll see how both disciplines have understood what we have called theological structures. And third, we'll explore how each has focused on diachronic developments. Let's look first at twofold revelation.

TWOFOLD REVELATION

You'll recall that God disclosed himself during the Old Testament in two main ways: through act revelations and word revelations. This twofold concept of revelation has characterized biblical theology of the New Testament as well. On the one hand, the New Testament reports many revelatory acts of God, such as Christ's earthly ministry, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the first century church. It also foretells acts of God that will take place in the future, such as the glorious return of Christ. But on the other hand, the New Testament also reports word revelations associated with the acts of God: God the Father spoke; Christ also spoke, and at times, angels and humans, by the Spirit of God, revealed God's word as well.

This is why New Testament narratives report both the actions and words of Jesus, the apostles, and other Christians in the New Testament; because God reveals himself through their actions and their words. Not only is this true for the narrative portions of the New Testament, but it is also true for the epistles. They occasionally reference or allude to God's actions on behalf of his people and they report God's word to his people.

You'll recall that Old Testament biblical theologians also drew attention to the temporal associations of act and word revelations. Some acts of God were followed by subsequent word revelations, some were associated with simultaneous word revelations, and still others were preceded by word revelations.

Biblical theologians have pointed out that the New Testament contains all three kinds of word revelation as well. The Gospels report how God spoke through the words of Jesus to reflect on Jesus' earlier actions. They also report times when Jesus' teachings explained his simultaneous actions, as well as times when Jesus predicted future actions.

The same can be said of the authors and characters in the books of Acts and Revelation as well as the New Testament epistles. Throughout the New Testament God revealed himself through the intersections between his actions and his words.

Like their Old Testament counterparts, New Testament biblical theologians have drawn attention to the twofold manner in which God revealed himself. Old and New Testament biblical theology both focus on God's act and word revelations.

THEOLOGICAL STRUCTURES

In addition to focusing on God's act and word revelations, Old Testament and New Testament biblical theology share similar ideas of theological structures. You'll recall that Old Testament biblical theologians identified theological outlooks by noting the many ways God's act and word revelations intersected with each other. They paid attention to the logical interconnections between what God did and said. These structures ranged from very basic to quite complex arrangements and New Testament biblical theologians have noticed the same kinds of theological structures in the New Testament.

Following the pattern of our earlier discussions of Old Testament theology, we'll touch on three levels of theological structures in New Testament theology: first, an example of basic-level structures; second, an example of middle-level structures; and third, an example of complex-level structures. Let's think first of basic-level theological structures in the New Testament.

Basic-Level Structures

Basic theological structures appear in the New Testament through relatively simple logical intersections of divine revelations. Divine words explain acts of God; particular acts of God clarify the meanings of his words. Different act revelations also logically connect to each other; and different word revelations intersect with each other as well. When these kinds of logical structures appear on a small scale, they form what we have called basic-level theological structures or perspectives.

By way of illustration, in Matthew 2:1-12, Matthew reported how God's act in Jesus' birth intersected with the actions and words of the Gentile Magi. Jesus' birth was announced to the world by a star in the sky. The Magi understood that this star announced the birth of a new king, and they spent many months, perhaps as long as two years following the star in search of the new king. And when they finally reached the child, they worshiped him. Matthew's account indicated a coherent outlook on the true theological significance of Jesus' birth: Jesus was the long awaited king of Israel whom these Gentiles worshiped.

At the same time, in Matthew 2:16-18, the gospel writer created another theological structure noting the logical intersections of Jesus' birth with the actions and words of King Herod. The Magi told Herod when the Messiah had been born, and his advisors told him how the Old Testament predicted the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. In an attempt to kill Jesus, Herod ordered every male infant two years old and

younger in Bethlehem to be killed. Matthew then reported Herod's horrible death under God's judgment.

Matthew's intersection of these acts and words created a theological structure that indicated another outlook on Jesus' birth: Jesus was the long awaited king of Israel whom Herod sought to destroy. In Matthew's account, these two sets of theological structures formed a striking contrast with each other, contributing to a theme that appears a number of times in his book. Herod's reaction to Jesus' birth foreshadowed the fact that many in Israel would reject Jesus as their Messiah and would even seek his death. By contrast, however, the Magi's reaction to Jesus' birth foreshadowed the fact that many Gentiles would welcome the promised king of the Jews and would adore him with great devotion and joy.

Having seen several basic-level theological structures in the New Testament, let's look at a few examples of what we may call middle-level theological structures.

Middle-Level Structures

When we broaden our view to include multiple basic-level theological structures, we often see that they form larger and more complex theological points of view. One of the most important of these moderately complex theological structures is the covenantal arrangement of New Testament theology.

For example, we speak of the collected books from Matthew's Gospel to John's Revelation as the "New *Testament."* Here the word "testament" is used synonymously with "covenant." We call this portion of the Bible the New Testament precisely because it is associated with the New Covenant predicted by Old Testament prophets. Several Old Testament prophets predicted that after Israel's exile, God would establish a final covenant with the people of Israel. Isaiah 54:10 and Ezekiel 34:25 and 37:26 referred to this covenant as a "covenant of peace." Jeremiah 31:31 refers to this same covenant as "a new covenant."

The middle-level theological structures associated with the New Covenant play a very important role in New Testament theology. You'll recall that we saw how covenants in the Old Testament organized much of Old Testament theology in terms of the dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty, and the consequences of blessings and curses. In much the same way, these four dynamics governed life in the New Covenant and organized the logical intersections of many larger sets of theological perspectives in the New Testament.

Complex-Level Structures

In addition to all sorts of basic and middle-level theological structures, the New Testament also presents various complex-level structures. As we might expect from our lessons on the Old Testament in this series, the most complex and comprehensive theological structure of the New Testament is the kingdom of God, the Bible's outlook on the goal of history as the transformation of the earth from the corruption of sin into the

place of God's glorious presence and reign. Let's sketch some of the contours of this highly complex theological structure in the New Testament.

At the beginning of the New Testament, John the Baptist and Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was near. Jesus' preaching and teaching constantly referred to the kingdom of God. In fact, Jesus' gospel message is most frequently called "the good news of the Kingdom." As we read in places like Matthew 4:23, 9:35, and 24:14, as well as Luke 4:43, 8:1, 16:16, and Acts 8:12.

Along with Old Testament writers, Jesus and the authors of the New Testament believed that from the beginning the goal of history had been for God to be glorified by establishing his reign over the whole earth through the service of his holy images. They were convinced that the work of God in Christ's first coming began the final stage of God's worldwide kingdom and that, in the end, the entire earth would be transformed into God's kingdom at the return of Christ, God's foremost holy image. We read of this hope in Revelation 11:15:

> **The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 11:15).**

As we will see later in this lesson, the theology of God's kingdom takes into account every aspect of New Testament theology. The coherent system of the entire New Testament can be summed up under the rubric of the coming of God's kingdom to earth through Christ.

So we see that New Testament biblical theology is very similar to Old Testament biblical theology both in its focus on act and word revelations, and in its identification of theological structures. But despite these similarities we need to be aware of one major contrast: the ways New Testament biblical theologians have handled diachronic developments.

DIACHRONIC DEVELOPMENTS

We will look into this aspect of biblical theology by touching on three issues. First, the diachronic character of New Testament theology; second, the obstacles to diachronic study of the New Testament; and third, a new direction that New Testament biblical theologians have emphasized in the place of diachronic analysis. Consider first the diachronic character of theological developments in the New Testament.

Diachronic Character

In our previous lesson, we saw that much attention has been given to the ways Old Testament theology developed with the passing of time. Each time God revealed more of himself by acting or speaking in history, to one degree or another, his new revelations reconfigured existing theological structures.

The same is true for New Testament history as well. As New Testament history moved forward, theological structures underwent diachronic changes. For instance, at the close of the Old Testament period, God's word through the prophets looked forward to the blessings of God when Israel returned from exile. When Christ appeared these theological concerns with return from exile shifted toward understanding how God had begun to pour out these blessings in Christ. Christ's earthly ministry brought the hope of eternal forgiveness of sins in his crucifixion; he secured the Old Testament hope for resurrection to new life in his resurrection; and his ascension into heaven granted the outpouring of the Holy Spirit predicted by Old Testament prophets. Moreover, as the apostles continued Christ's work, the Old Testament hope of extending God's mercy to the Gentiles after the exile became a reality through the spread of the gospel. And of course, the New Testament predictions of Christ's glorious return pointed to the day when Old Testament hopes for an entirely new creation would come in Christ.

Obstacles

Diachronic theological developments like these appear in the New Testament period, but New Testament history presents at least three major obstacles to extensive diachronic analysis. In the first place, by comparison with the Old Testament, the New Testament covers a very short period of history. Compare the length of history in the Old and New Testaments for a moment. Not including the prehistoric days of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the Old Testament deals with over 1600 years of history extending from the time of Abraham who lived around 2000 B.C. to the last prophet who ministered around 400 B.C. By comparison, New Testament history is very short. The entire New Testament represents only around 100 years of history. Although the New Testament introduces the most significant diachronic development so far in history — Christ's earthly ministry — it simply does not cover enough history for there to have been major diachronic developments within that period itself.

In the second place, most situations in the New Testament are very similar to each other. By contrast the Old Testament presents a great variety of circumstances in its history. In the patriarchal period, God's people were a semi-nomadic family in Canaan. Then they were slaves in Egypt. Next they became a new nation under Moses' leadership. After that, they conquered Canaan during the period of the Judges. Their circumstances changed again when Israel's early monarchy moved the nation toward imperial splendor, and again when later kings and leaders vacillated between obedience and rebellion. Their situation worsened when God sent them into in exile. And it improved when he finally began to restore the kingdom through those who returned to the Promised Land from exile.

As God's people went through these various circumstances, he acted and spoke to them in ways that were appropriate for their situations, accommodating himself to their needs. These diachronic accommodations to Israel's circumstances produced great variety in the theological developments of the Old Testament.

By comparison, however, the circumstances of God's people were fairly consistent during New Testament history. To be sure, situations did not remain precisely the same. Jesus, the apostles, and the church dealt with different kinds of people in

different circumstances and God's revelation accommodated those differences. Yet, throughout this period of history, early Christians did not face the kinds of extreme changes that took place with God's people in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Christians were consistently marginalized and persecuted. They didn't experience periods of tremendous wealth and horrible poverty. They didn't travel *en masse* from one place to another. Nor did they experience periods of wide-scale obedience and disobedience. As a result, God's revelations recorded in the New Testament did not accommodate as wide a variety of circumstances as his revelations in the Old Testament. And this stability has made diachronic developments less significant in New Testament theology.

In the third place, unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament deals with only one divine covenant. As we have seen, covenants in the Old Testament signaled major epochal shifts in theology. The covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David were quite different from each other. And as a result, very significant theological changes occurred as history moved through each of these covenant periods.

By contrast, the New Testament only represents one covenant, the New Covenant in Christ. This covenant began to unfold as New Testament history moved from Christ's first coming and into the history of the church. And this entire range of history was characterized by the dynamics of divine benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessings and curses of just one covenant. The absence of multiple covenants in the New Testament also diminished the significance of diachronic developments in the New Testament.

New Direction

Because diachronic changes in New Testament history were not as dramatic as changes in the Old Testament, New Testament biblical theologians have shifted their attention in a new direction. Instead of focusing on different historical periods, they have tended to treat the entire period of New Testament history as a whole.

Now, as we have said there are diachronic developments in the New Testament. There are significant changes between Jesus' earthly ministry, the history of the church and the return of Christ in glory. Even so, it's fair to say that the New Testament tends to treat these developments as a unified whole, as part of a single picture of Christ and his work. For example, the Gospels not only tell us about Jesus' life, but also refer many times to the ongoing ministry of the church after Jesus' departure and also to his return in glory. The book of Acts and the epistles do not simply deal with events after Jesus' ministry, but also refer back to Jesus' lifetime and look forward to his return. The book of Revelation not only deals with Jesus' future return, but also looks back to his life and the history of the church after his departure.

The theological unity created by the New Testament's brief history, uniform circumstances, and single covenant makes it difficult to do extensive diachronic study. So, biblical theologians have shifted the majority of their attention in a new direction. Instead of dividing the history of God's New Testament act and word revelations into small segments, they have focused on the ways different New Testament authors provided different perspectives on the entire period.

In fact, the New Testament provides us with many different theological assessments of the whole history of this period. Consider for instance, that the one history of Jesus' life is described in four different ways by four gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Although the gospel writers did not contradict each other, their books offer very different outlooks on the historical events of Christ's life. They represent four different theological perspectives. The same can be said of the book of Acts; the epistles of Paul, Peter, James, John, and Jude; as well as the books of Hebrews and Revelation. They all present varying theological perspectives on the whole of New Testament revelation. These portions of the New Testament do not contradict each other, but they display different theological vocabularies, categories, and emphases.

For this reason, New Testament biblical theologians have taken their discipline in a direction that has proven to be very fruitful. They have compared the ways different New Testament authors offered distinctive theological understandings of the historical period stretching from Christ's life to his return. They ask questions like: How did Paul interpret the mighty acts of God in New Testament history? How did Luke and John do this? What were their differences? What views did they hold in common? This direction has led New Testament biblical theologians to many important insights.

Now that we have a general orientation toward the contours of New Testament biblical theology, we should turn to our second main topic in this lesson, developments in eschatology, the biblical teaching about the last days. As we will see, no other subject is as central to the ways biblical theologians have approached the theology of the New Testament. But to understand why biblical theology has had this emphasis, we must grasp how the New Testament's outlooks on the last days developed out of earlier viewpoints.

DEVELOPMENTS IN ESCHATOLOGY

We will look in three directions. First, we'll set the stage by touching on traditional eschatology, the ways this topic has been approached in systematic theology. Second, we'll look into Old Testament eschatology to see the developments of Old Testament views on the last days. And third, we will examine outlooks on eschatology in early New Testament times. Let's begin with a look at eschatology in traditional systematic theology.

TRADITIONAL

The term "eschatology" derives from the Greek adjective *eschatos* which usually means the "last," "final" or "end." The word appears some fifty-two times in the New Testament as well as many times in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the term *eschatos* refers at least fifteen times to the "last days," "final things" or "end times." And so, eschatology is a theological technical term meaning "the doctrine of the last days, final things or end times."

Through the centuries, eschatology has been a major category of traditional systematic theology. Systematicians have normally discussed the teachings of Scripture in five major categories: theology proper, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology and finally eschatology. In systematic theology, as well as in a number of significant confessions and creeds, eschatology has usually been the last major topic because it has focused primarily on the future, specifically the events associated with the return of Christ.

Now, through the centuries, most Christians have realized that the Bible is very clear about certain aspects of the end times. They have heartily agreed on some basic issues like Christ's glorious return, the resurrection of the body, and the final judgment resulting in condemnation for the lost and everlasting life for those who are in Christ. But beyond these basic teachings, traditional discussions of eschatology have led to sharp divisions among believers. Take, for example, the issue of the millennium that centers on the interpretation of Revelation 20, John's prediction of Christ's 1000-year reign on earth. Sincere believers through the centuries have taken a variety of interpretive positions: Does this chapter refer to a literal 1000-year reign, or not? Will it be preceded by certain identifiable signs? Has it already begun? Well-informed followers of Christ have answered these questions in different ways. They have followed multiple orientations toward eschatology because the biblical teaching on matters like these is not immediately clear.

It is here that New Testament biblical theology holds great promise. Biblical theologians have approached eschatology in ways that cut across the grain of traditional debates. They have introduced new strategies and they have brought fresh insights to traditional understandings of eschatology. And this has led many Christians of all eschatological orientations into deeper unity with each other.

To understand how New Testament biblical theologians have understood the last days in ways that have moved beyond traditional approaches, we need to become familiar with the background of Old Testament eschatology.

OLD TESTAMENT

As we have seen throughout this series, when God disclosed himself through act and word revelations, he caused developments in theology. Eschatology, what the Bible teaches about last things, was not immune from such diachronic developments. Just as with other subjects, the Old Testament's teachings about the last days also developed in significant ways over time. These diachronic developments in the Old Testament set the stage for what New Testament biblical theologians have discovered about eschatology in the New Testament as well.

In this section, we will briefly touch on how eschatology developed alongside the major covenant administrations of the Old Testament we have studied in this series. Beginning with the covenant with Adam we will follow chronologically through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Each of these stages contributed essential elements to the eschatology of the Old Testament.

Adam

At the very beginning of biblical history, God revealed two crucial elements of Old Testament eschatology. The first of these is implicit in the creation itself. Humanity was created in God's image. And we were called to work as his royal priests, filling the earth and subduing it. Through these aspects of the creation, God revealed that his goal for history was for the whole earth to be a place where his glory would dwell with his people.

With Adam and Eve's sin, and the curse that fell on them, God revealed the second crucial element of Old Testament eschatology: From this point forward there would be two groups of people competing for control of the world. Genesis 3:15 reveals that the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent will fight for control of the world. The seed of the woman are those who remain faithful to God, while the seed of the serpent are those who follow the ways of Satan. Until the end of time, these two groups will war for control of the world. But God promised that victory will ultimately belong to himself and to the faithful seed of the woman.

Having seen the two elements introduced during the time of Adam, let's turn our attention to Noah's covenant.

Noah

Following the worldwide flood in Genesis 7, God made a covenant with Noah. This covenant secured the stability of nature so that humanity would not have to fear annihilation as they pursued God's plan for the world. In Genesis 8:22, God said that the seasons, day, and night would continue “as long as the earth endures.” By this promise, he assured the faithful 'seed of the woman' that they would have the natural environment necessary to achieve God's goal for them. The ground that had been cursed through the fall would not prevail against them. And in fact, the stability granted through Noah's covenant would continue until the goal of history had been reached. At this point, a new covenantal arrangement for nature would take over.

Having seen the basic vision of history’s end given during the universal covenants with Adam and Noah, we should turn to the major diachronic development of Old Testament eschatology that took place in the days of Abraham, the first one with whom God made a national covenant.

Abraham

God’s covenant with Abraham is recorded in Genesis 15 and 17. But the themes of that covenant are introduced even earlier in Genesis 12:1-3. In those verses God singled out Abraham, from all the families of the earth, to be the one through whom he would carry out his promises given to Adam and Noah. The blessings given to Abraham and his family were to be mediated to the rest of the world through them. In fact, God promised Israel success, on a small scale, in fulfilling the call given to Adam and Eve in

the Garden. Therefore, the eschatology of the Old Testament narrows to a focus on Abraham and his family. The end goal of history would be brought to the whole world through them.

Moses

Now we are in a position to look at the second covenant God made with Israel, the covenant with Moses. In the days of Moses, Old Testament eschatology developed even further. The diachronic developments of eschatology under the covenant of Moses are rather complex. So, we'll examine them in two steps: first, the curse of exile; and second, the blessings of restoration from exile.

As we have seen, Moses' covenant focused on the law of God as the guide for Israel's special service in spreading his worldwide kingdom. The Israelites were offered many blessings if they would obey the law, but were also threatened with many curses if they turned from the Law of Moses. In fact, in a number of passages Moses anticipated that future generations of Israel would turn from the ways of God. He warned them of many severe consequences of disobedience, but his greatest threat against continuing, flagrant violation of God's law was a national exile from the Promised Land. Listen to the way Moses put it in Deuteronomy 4:27-28:

> **The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the Lord will drive you. There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell (Deuteronomy 4:27-28).**

The threat of Israel's exile was not just a terrible prospect for the Israelites, but for the entire human race. Remember that from the time of Abraham, God's goal for history was to be achieved through Israel. An exile would greatly decrease the numbers of Israelites and would remove them from the land, thus making the promises to Abraham and the call to Adam and Eve much harder to fulfill.

With the negative ramifications of exile in mind, we should turn to the theme of restoration from exile that God promised through Moses. Happily, Moses made it clear that despite Israel's future exile, God would not give up on Israel as his special people. In Deuteronomy 4:30-31, God promised that when Israel repented of its sins and turned back to God in faithful obedience, he would hear them and restore them to the land. Even more than this, in Deuteronomy 30:5 God promised in this restoration to make them more numerous and prosperous than ever before.

One key feature of Moses' eschatology is the way he described this time of Israel's repentance and restoration to the land. Listen to what he said in Deuteronomy 4:30.

> **When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him (Deuteronomy 4:30).**

Moses' statement here is crucial to the diachronic development of Old Testament eschatology because Moses used the terminology, translated here "the later days." This phrase is translated in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, by the term *eschatos* and it characterizes the time of Israel's glorious return from exile. Moses' choice of words here became the basis upon which Old Testament prophets and New Testament authors described the last stage of world history as "the last days," "the latter days," or the "*eschaton*." From this point forward, the return of Israel from exile played a crucial role in the Bible's teaching about eschatology.

David

Now we are in a position to turn to the developments of eschatology that emerged during the period of David's covenant. Developments in this period were relatively complex as well. So we'll explore them in three steps: first, the days of the united monarchy; second, the time of Israel's earlier prophets; and third, the days of Israel's later prophets. Consider first how God's revelations transformed eschatology in the time of Israel's united monarchy.

As we have seen in this series, God's covenant with David focused especially on the establishment of David's family as Israel's permanent dynasty. In this covenant, David's descendants and Jerusalem with its temple played a central role in all of Israel's theology, including its understanding of the end times. From this point forward, the end of history was attached to the success of David's royal house ruling from Jerusalem. In fact in Psalm 72:8-11 we find that a future son of David will rule over the entire earth.

> **He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him (Psalm 72:8-11).**

And this vision of the future is expanded further in Psalm 72:17-19.

> **May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed. Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen (Psalm 72:17-19).**

From this point forward the end of history was attached to the success of David's royal house ruling from Jerusalem over the entire world.

Now we should move to the words of Israel's early prophets. Israel's earlier prophets applied the dynamics of Moses' covenant within David's royal covenant. They explained even further how the conditions of David's house would relate to the last days. Early prophets warned David's unfaithful sons that God would not tolerate flagrant

violations of his law, and that God was about to send the entire nation into exile. These threats were ultimately fulfilled with the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 or 586 B.C.

Yet, to assure Israel that all hope had not been lost, Israel's earlier prophets also recalled Moses' connection between the wonders of the last days and Israel's return from exile. The prophets declared that in the restoration from exile, a great son of David, in his capital city of Jerusalem, would become the focus of a new order. Listen to how the prophet Amos put it in Amos 9:11-12:

> **In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name (Amos 9:11-12).**

Along these same lines Isaiah wrote these words in Isaiah 2:2:

> **In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it (Isaiah 2:2).**

Amos announced that David's "tent" would be restored so that all the nations of the earth would bear the name of the Lord, and Isaiah said that "in the last days," in other words the days after the exile, Jerusalem would become the greatest city on earth and the peoples of all nations would stream to her for salvation. With such high hopes in the glory of David's house and Jerusalem after exile, it is no wonder that the prophet Jeremiah assured Israel that the time of exile would last for only seventy years. In Jeremiah 25:11 and 29:10, the prophet spoke of seventy years of exile — a customary way in the ancient world of speaking of a time of divine judgment. Jeremiah and other earlier prophets frequently announced that in the last days, when God's people returned from exile, there would be worldwide glory for David's house and Jerusalem.

Building upon the ministries of Israel's earlier prophets, God revealed even further diachronic developments in eschatology through his later prophets. God's involvement in history brought about at least two major shifts to the Old Testament concept of the last days. On the one side, the time of exile was extended because the Israelites in exile did not repent of their sins. In Daniel 9, Daniel reported that during the exile he was reading Jeremiah's prophecies of seventy years of exile, but he felt compelled to confess that the Israelites in exile had not yet repented of their sins. Yet, he still asked God to return Israel to the land and to restore Jerusalem. As we read later in Daniel 9, the angel Gabriel delivered God's answer to Daniel. Israel's exile would not end when Jeremiah had said. Because God's people had failed to repent, the exile would be extended seven times longer, to seventy weeks of years. As God had established as early as Leviticus 26, he would respond to continuing sin with curses seven times greater. Put simply, Daniel learned that God had postponed Israel's glorious restoration for approximately 490 years.

On the other side, later prophets also revealed that God showed great mercy to his people by giving them the opportunity to shorten their exile. In 539 B.C. God fulfilled his

word through Jeremiah in an unexpected way. He caused the conquering Persian emperor, Cyrus, to release Israel to rebuild the temple of God in Jerusalem. At this time a small number of Israelites returned to the Promised Land under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a descendant of David.

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah, as well as the author of Chronicles, encouraged this small group of returnees to move forward in the blessings of God by rebuilding Jerusalem. But sadly, by the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the restored community had flagrantly disregarded God's law once again. So, the prophet Malachi declared that the beginning of Israel's glorious eschatological hopes were postponed to a time in the distant future, much like Daniel had learned before him. The Old Testament ends with this sad postponement of the eschatological age.

So we see that Old Testament eschatology developed diachronically. It began in seminal form in the days of Adam and was refined further in the days of Noah. In Abraham's time, Israel's blessing to the world became the means by which God would bring history to its ultimate end. Moses connected this hope with Israel's glorious return from exile. The covenant with David set his dynasty and Jerusalem at the center of these glorious last days after exile. And although there was a brief period of hope when a number of Israelites returned to the land from Babylon, Israel's continuing rebellion caused the Old Testament to end with the hope of the *eschaton* postponed to the distant future.

With the diachronic developments of eschatology within the Old Testament in mind, we're now in a position to see how the doctrine of the last days developed even further in New Testament times.

EARLY CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY

We'll touch on two issues: First, the outlooks on the last days held by most first century Jews; and second, the dramatic revision of eschatology in the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus.

First-Century Judaism

The vast majority of Jews in Palestine in the first century held to views of the last days that resembled those of the Old Testament. As the prophet Daniel had predicted, Israel had suffered under the tyranny of Gentiles for centuries. The Babylonians, the Medes and the Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Romans extended Israel's exile for hundreds of years.

Throughout these centuries, faithful Jews longed to see the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes of the restoration and glory for Israel in the last days. Many rabbis expressed this hope in a twofold view of history. On the one hand, they referred to their current circumstances as "this age." This age extended through the ups and downs of Israel's history, to the low point of Jerusalem's destruction and Israel's lengthy exile. The

apparent victory of evil over good caused them to characterize this age in largely negative terms. It was a time of failure, sorrow and death.

On the other hand, many rabbis also spoke of a second period of history, the time of future glory for Israel. They called this future period "the age to come." This time in history would be a never-ending age of Israel's blessing and triumph over evil. At that time, God would gather all of his exiled people, judge the unfaithful in Israel, judge the wicked among the nations, glorify Jerusalem and her king, and spread the blessings of Abraham to the ends of the earth.

During the decades prior to and during Jesus' lifetime, there were many religious factions among the Jews in Palestine. These factions held different views on how the transition from this age to the age to come would take place. Apocalyptic sects believed that the *eschaton* would come through an abrupt, catastrophic divine intervention. Others groups, often called Zealots, believed that the age to come would arise as Jews rose up militarily against their Roman rulers and saw God's support for their efforts. Parties called Nomists, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, held that the last days would come only when Israel proved to be faithful to the law of Moses.

Although there was much disagreement over the precise way this age would transition into the age to come, in one way or another most Jews believed that it would take place with the appearance of the Messiah, the great son of David promised in the Old Testament. The Messiah would bring about the decisive turning point in world history, the final transition from a world of darkness to light, a world of defeat to victory, a world of evil to righteousness, a world of death to life.

Although the views commonly held by Jews in the first century by and large accorded with the teachings of the Old Testament, major diachronic developments in eschatology took place through divine revelation in the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus.

John and Jesus

John the Baptist and Jesus both announced that the arrival of the kingdom of God in the last days was near. Listen to the way this announcement is described in Mark 1:15:

> **"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).**

The phrase "kingdom of God" does not appear in the Old Testament, but this announcement of the kingdom drew from an association between God's reign, and what Moses and the prophets called "the last days," or the end of Israel's exile. Listen to the way Isaiah referred to the reign of God after the exile in Isaiah 52:7-10:

> **"Your God reigns!" Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes…The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:7-10).**

Isaiah described the return from exile with an image of God leading his people back to Jerusalem. The good news declared to the ruins of Jerusalem was "Your God reigns." In effect, Isaiah announced that when God restores his people in the last days, he will demonstrate that he reigns victoriously over all the nations and their idols.

In one sense, John the Baptist held to a view of the last days that was very similar to his Jewish contemporaries. He believed that the last stage of history, God's kingdom on earth, would come through the Messiah acting quickly and decisively, exercising judgment against sinners and pouring out enormous blessings on God's repentant people. Listen to the way he put it in Luke 3:9:

> **The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire (Luke 3:9).**

We see here that John the Baptist associated the coming of the kingdom of God not only with blessings for God's people but also judgment against the enemies of God.

Even so, John the Baptist's view of the last days represented a very significant development. He moved beyond his Jewish contemporaries by identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the great son of David who was about to bring the Kingdom of God of the last days. But John the Baptist had a problem. As Jesus' ministry unfolded without a full display of judgment as well as blessings, John wondered if Jesus was in fact the Messiah. In Luke 7:20 we read that John the Baptist sent two of his disciples to Jesus with a question:

> **John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:20).**

It's no wonder that John asked this question. Jesus had not done all the Old Testament, first century Jews and John himself had announced that the Messiah would do.

But now listen to the way Jesus responded to John the Baptist in Luke 7:22-23:

> **The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me (Luke 7:22-23).**

In this passage, Jesus alluded to a number of prophecies from Isaiah about the restoration of Israel in the last days after exile. By referring to these things, he affirmed the fact that the act and word revelations of his ministry demonstrated that he was in the process of fulfilling Old Testament prophecies of the last days.

But Jesus also warned John the Baptist and everyone else not to "fall away on account of" him. Jesus encouraged John not to lose hope because of the *way* he was fulfilling God's kingdom of the last days. In a word, Jesus told John the Baptist, "I have fulfilled enough end-time expectations of God's kingdom for you to believe that I will fulfill the rest." To put it in the terms of this lesson, Jesus' words alluded to a major

diachronic development that was taking place. The Old Testament perspective on the last days transformed in dramatic ways from the days of Adam to Malachi. And in the same way, God's revelations through Jesus were bringing yet another transformation of eschatology.

Jesus declared that the age to come was not going to appear suddenly as had been expected. Instead, the *eschaton* would be fulfilled over a long stretch of time. In a number of his kingdom parables in Matthew 13–25, Jesus explained that the kingdom of God would come in three phases. It would begin with his first coming in a small way, grow for an indefinite period of time, and reach its fullness only when he returned in glory. Jesus' earthly ministry would inaugurate the age to come with some blessings and judgments of the last days. The age to come would continue alongside this age for a period of time as Christ reigned in heaven and his church grew. And then at the second coming of Christ, the age to come would reach its consummation and this age of sin and death would come to an end.

Biblical theologians often refer to this development of eschatology in a number of ways. They describe it as the "already, but not yet," the "now, but not yet," and the "overlap of the ages." Sometimes they speak of it simply as "inaugurated eschatology." Whatever the terminology, the basic idea is the same.

Old Testament prophets, first century Jews, and even John the Baptist thought of the arrival of the last days more or less as a single historical step. Jesus also viewed the transition to the last days as the last step of history, but consider this analogy: We all know that a normal human step can be seen as one motion, a single step. But if we look at it more closely, it isn't difficult to see that it can be divided into at least three phases: lifting your foot from the ground, extending it through the air and lowering your foot to the ground. In much the same way, Jesus explained that the last days or the *eschaton* would come incrementally. He announced that it was inaugurated at his first coming, that it would continue growing for a period of time, and it would finally reach its consummation at his glorious return.

With the ways biblical eschatology developed from the time of Adam to the time of Jesus in mind, we're in a position to see how biblical theologians have approached eschatology in the New Testament.

NEW TESTAMENT ESCHATOLOGY

As modern followers of Christ, we entered the Christian faith with a modern cultural background. We all came to Christ with views of life that are very different from the backgrounds of New Testament writers. And because of these differences, we often have to work very hard to grasp the mindset, the worldview that governed the ways New Testament authors conceived of their faith. This is one of the great advantages of biblical theology. It has brought to light some of the basic outlooks to which New Testament authors referred over and over as they expressed their Christian faith.

To grasp how biblical theology has approached these matters, we'll look at three issues. First, we'll touch on the importance of eschatology in the New Testament.

Second, we'll explore the New Testament concept of Christ, or Christology, as the fulfillment of the *eschaton*. And third, we'll see how New Testament soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, was shaped by eschatology. Let's look first at the importance of eschatology.

IMPORTANCE

Although it may sound like an overstatement at first, Jesus' three-phase eschatology was so prominent in the hearts of early Christians that we find it either explicitly or implicitly on every page of the New Testament. Of course, we know the New Testament touches on many other theoretical and practical subjects. But biblical theologians have demonstrated that in one way or another every New Testament teaching was shaped by Jesus' three-phase view of the last days.

For generations the vast majority of Jews in Palestine had yearned for the Messiah to usher in the last days — the age of victory, salvation and eternal life. With the probable exception of Luke, every New Testament writer was Jewish. And each one of them, including Luke, had deeply engaged Jewish theology. As a result, the Jewish theological concern with the Messianic last days contributed in significant ways to the basic theological framework of New Testament writers.

Eschatology was especially important for the New Testament because Jesus' teaching about the last days represented one of the most decisive ways in which Christians had broken with first century Judaism. Jewish religious leaders and the general Jewish population raged against Christianity precisely because of the Christian outlook on the Messianic last days. Christians believed that the Messiah had already come, but in a way that was unexpected. He had suffered and died at the hands of Jews and Gentiles; he had been resurrected and had ascended into heaven where he ruled over all; and he would return one day to judge all of humanity, including unbelievers within Israel. Such a messianic scenario was utterly contrary to what most Jews believed in that day. And for these reasons, New Testament authors were deeply preoccupied with Jesus' three-phase eschatology. And this preoccupation is reflected in everything they wrote.

One simple way to see how pervasive eschatology was to New Testament authors is to notice that they spoke of the entire New Testament period as "the last days." First, New Testament authors called the days of Jesus and his apostles, "the last days" or *eschaton* as we can see in Hebrews 1:1-2.

> **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 (Hebrews 1:1-2).**

Here the author of Hebrews referred to the time of his readers as the "last days." In doing so he did not mean to point to some future time right before Jesus returns, but to the fact that through Jesus, God had spoken finally and definitively. With Jesus' inauguration of the kingdom, the promised last days of the Old Testament had come to the earth.

Second, New Testament writers designated the extended period of church history as the last days in places like 2 Timothy 3:1-5:

> **But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God — having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them (2 Timothy 3:1-5).**

This list of sins that Paul said would be committed in the "last days" were all sins that were occurring in Paul's day, and he warned Timothy about those sins. But these are sins that also continue to occur throughout history even to our present day. That Paul wasn't referring to some future time can be seen in his exhortation to "have nothing to do with them." The wicked people of the "last days" were a threat to Timothy because the "last days" had already come to the world through Jesus.

Third, New Testament authors described the consummation of the kingdom at Christ's return as "the last days." We can see this in John 6:39:

> **This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day (John 6:39).**

Here Jesus taught his disciples about his relationship to the Father. His reference to the "last day" points forward to the ultimate final day when he returns in glory, when the dead will rise and God will judge the world.

As these and other passages demonstrate, New Testament writers believed that all revelations from God from the time of Jesus' earthly ministry until his return in glory took place in the last days. Their teachings could only be understood and followed correctly within the framework of Jesus' three-phase eschatology.

CHRISTOLOGY

Now we are in a position to see how New Testament Christology, or the doctrine of Christ, presents Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's eschatological hopes. We will look at this topic in two steps. First, we'll touch on the ways systematic theology has dealt with the topic of Christology. And second we'll see how biblical theologians have understood this subject. Let's look first at Christology in systematic theology.

Systematic Theology

In traditional systematic theology, Christology has concentrated on themes that were of critical concern at certain periods in church history. For example, systematicians

focused on issues like the relation of Christ to the other persons of the Trinity, the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures in his one person, the states of Christ's humiliation and exaltation, the nature of his atonement, and the three offices of Christ as prophet, priest and king. Without a doubt, the New Testament addresses these and similar matters, and they continue to be important topics for the church even today.

But biblical theologians have taken Christology in a different direction. They have stressed that New Testament authors primarily presented Christ as the one in whom every facet of Old Testament hope found fulfillment.

Biblical Theology

Biblical theologians often point to the time when Jesus met two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus to illustrate the importance of Christ in the interpretation of the Old Testament. In Luke 24:26-27 we read these words,

> **"Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:26-27).**

Notice here that Jesus explained how the Old Testament spoke of him. He referred his disciples to "Moses and all the Prophets," to the entire Old Testament, and showed them "what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." Time and again, biblical theology has pointed out that New Testament authors follow Jesus' example here by treating himself as the fulfillment of Old Testament eschatology.

The New Testament points out many ways in which Jesus fulfilled prophecies about the last days, but the fulfillment of prophecy does not adequately express the New Testament outlook on Christ. Instead, we have to understand that New Testament eschatological hope was concentrated in the person of Jesus. Jesus was the centerpiece of New Testament eschatology.

Recall for a moment our discussion of Old Testament typology in the previous lesson. At every stage of Old Testament history, key persons, institutions and events appeared in ways that indicated the goals toward which God was moving history. They were preliminary displays, foreshadows, or types of what would be fully realized at the end of history. For this reason, because Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah through whom God brought the *eschaton*, New Testament authors spoke of Christ as the fulfillment of all Old Testament types.

To mention just a few examples, at the earliest stages of history God moved the world toward its final goal by calling Adam to rule over the world as the royal priest of God's kingdom; Jesus completes humanity's rule over the world in the last days as the great king and high priest. God ordained Noah to rescue humanity from God's judgment to further God's kingdom purposes; Jesus does this once and for all in the *eschaton* through his death and resurrection. God promised Abraham that his descendants would bring God's blessings to all the families of the earth; Jesus finally brings this about in the last days through the spread of the gospel. God raised up Moses to give Israel the

revelation of his law; Jesus reveals God's final word in the *eschaton*. God told David that his dynasty would conquer God's enemies and rule over the world on God's behalf; Jesus makes this happen in the last days. These are but a few examples that illustrate how New Testament writers saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes.

Now we must remember that Jesus and the New Testament explain that his fulfillment of Old Testament expectations would take place in three phases: the inauguration, continuation and consummation of the kingdom. Because of this, New Testament writers often drew attention to different ways in which Jesus fulfills Old Testament hopes. For example, Jesus began to fulfill Adam's call to rule first in his earthly ministry. He continues to extend his reign over the world now. And he will rule over every inch of creation, making all things new, when he returns in glory.

Jesus fulfilled Noah's rescue of humanity for service to God in his earthly ministry as he called men and women to repent and ordered his disciples to baptize them. He continues to do this as the church calls people around the world to salvation and baptism. And Jesus will ultimately deliver from divine judgment when he returns for the masses of humanity who have faithfully followed him.

Jesus also fulfilled Abraham's call to be a blessing to the entire world. First, he and his disciples reached out to Gentiles. Second, he continues to do this now by bringing the blessings of salvation to people all over the world. And third, he will complete this aspect of God's kingdom when he fills the new creation with redeemed people from every tribe and nation.

Jesus also fulfilled the guidance of Moses' law as he and his disciples affirmed God's law and brought new revelation. Jesus' guidance of his people continues now as his Spirit equips the church to spread biblical teachings to the ends of the earth. And when Christ returns, every person in the new creation will have the law of God written perfectly on their hearts.

Finally, Jesus also fulfilled the promise of victory and global rule for the house of David. He did this first by conquering Satan through his death, resurrection and ascension. His church continues to spread Christ's spiritual victory over the world through the gospel. And when Christ returns, he will judge all of God's enemies and rule over the entire creation as the great son of David.

These examples provide a framework from within which we can grasp many specific ways New Testament authors focused on Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes. Christ personally brings to full realization every hope of Old Testament eschatology in the three phases of the last days.

SOTERIOLOGY

Biblical theologians have often understood the doctrine of salvation or soteriology in new ways. To see what we mean, we'll look at this topic first by touching on soteriology in traditional systematic theology. And then we'll see how this doctrine has been treated in biblical theology. Consider first soteriology in systematic theology.

Systematic Theology

In broad terms, traditional systematic theologians have divided the doctrine of salvation into two basic categories: *historia salutis*, or the history of salvation, and *ordo salutis*, or the order of salvation. The history of salvation refers to the ways God accomplished salvation in objective history. The order of salvation refers to the subjective application of salvation to individual people.

In systematic theology, the accomplishment of salvation, or *historia salutis*, has been rather narrowly defined as the sum of what God accomplished in the earthly ministry of Christ. Much attention has been given to the atonement of Christ. For whom did Christ die? Why did he die for us? What did his death accomplish? In recent decades more attention has been given to the resurrection of Christ. Why did Christ rise from the dead? What does his new life have to do with our salvation? Systematic theologians also speak of Christ's ascension and enthronement in heaven, and how his present reign affects those who believe in him. And they also speak of the return of Christ in glory under the rubric of eschatology. But apart from these main considerations, systematic theologians have not devoted much attention to the objective accomplishment of salvation.

Instead, systematicians have concentrated most of their attention on the application of salvation, or the *ordo salutis.* This emphasis has set the course for most Christians by emphasizing how salvation is to be applied to the lives of individual people. Even today when we use terms like regeneration, repentance, faith, justification, sanctification and glorification we usually have in mind specific aspects of the application of salvation to individuals. In the theological vocabulary of nearly every branch of the church, regeneration refers to the new birth that people experience as salvation is initially applied to them. Repentance is a person's turning away from sin and toward Christ. Faith is an individual's trust and reliance on God's grace in Christ for salvation. Justification is God's forensic declaration of a person's imputed righteousness received through the instrument of faith alone. The term sanctification usually indicates an individual's growth in holiness. And glorification is the complete application of salvation to a person, the reward of eternal life.

Many of us are familiar with the ways these and other aspects of soteriology are discussed in systematic theology. But New Testament biblical theology has looked at the doctrine of salvation from a different vantage point: perspectives that are derived from Jesus' three-phase eschatology.

Biblical Theology

By contrast with systematic theologians, biblical theologians have focused much more on the accomplishment of salvation, the *historia salutis.* They have shown that in the New Testament the application of salvation to individuals is always understood within the framework of the three phases of Jesus' eschatology, the historical accomplishment of salvation in him.

Imagine New Testament soteriology as the set on a theatrical stage. From the outlook of biblical theology, the accomplishment of salvation in Christ forms the backdrop of the stage. This backdrop has three large panels representing the inauguration, continuation and consummation of the last days. The application of salvation to an individual life is like the actions of a character standing near the foreground of the stage. New Testament authors described what happens when salvation comes to an individual, as if they were looking at the stage from three different seats in the audience. They view a person's experience of salvation against the three background panels representing the inauguration, continuation and consummation of the last days.

From the first vantage point, a follower of Christ rests his or her salvation on being joined to what Christ accomplished during the inauguration of the last days. From the second vantage point, a follower of Christ experiences salvation through his or her lifetime by being joined to what Christ is accomplishing during the continuation of the last days. And from the third vantage point, followers of Christ will experience salvation when they are joined to what Christ will accomplish at the consummation of the last days.

For the most part, it's easy to see that this is the way New Testament authors related the accomplishment of salvation to the application of salvation. For example, the apostle Paul used the term salvation in three basic ways. Sometimes he spoke of it from the first vantage point as something that had already occurred. For instance, we read these words in Romans 8:24:

> **For in this hope we were saved (Romans 8:24).**

Here Paul spoke of our past experience of being regenerated by the Holy Spirit and set on a new course of life because we were joined to what Christ accomplished 2000 years ago.

At other times, Paul spoke of salvation from the second vantage point as a current, ongoing reality in the experience of believers. As he put it in 1 Corinthians 1:18,

> **For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).**

Here Paul spoke of our daily ongoing salvation in Christ, which is certainly based on what Christ did in the inauguration of the kingdom, but it's also closely tied to our union with him in his heavenly ministry now.

At other times, Paul spoke of salvation from the third vantage point as something that was still future, something that was still to occur at Christ's return. As he said in Romans 5:9:

> **Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! (Romans 5:9).**

Consider just one striking example. The last facet of the *ordo salutis* is commonly known as "glorification." We normally use this term as a reference to what happens to individuals when Christ returns. But biblical theologians have noted that we truncate the concept of glorification in the New Testament, if we limit it simply to what happens at

the consummation of Christ's return. For example, Paul wrote of glorification in terms of all three phases of the last days. In the first place, he spoke of it as something that has already happened to believers. Listen to what he wrote in Romans 8:29-30:

> **For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified (Romans 8:29-30).**

The verb translated "glorified" is *edoxasen* and this form of the verb indicates an event that had already taken place. Because individuals in Christ are joined to Christ's glorification in his resurrection and ascension, they have already received with him a measure of glorification. Believers have already been glorified in Christ.

In addition to this, Paul also indicated that glorification is an ongoing reality for faithful believers. The daily experience of living in union with Christ can also be spoken of as glorification. As Paul put it about himself and his company in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

> **And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).**

The phrase translated "with ever increasing glory" is *apo doxēs eis doxan* which may more literally be translated, "from glory to glory". Here the apostle Paul made the point that the Christian life of service to Christ is an increasing glorification of the believer.

And of course, Paul spoke of glorification as something that happens in the future. Much like systematic theologians, Paul understood that followers of Christ will receive ultimate glory when Christ returns. As we read in 2 Timothy 2:10:

> **Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory (2 Timothy 2:10).**

In much the same way, biblical theologians have indicated that New Testament authors thought so much in terms of the three phases of Jesus' eschatology that they treated every aspect of soteriology in this threefold manner.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have introduced the contours of New Testament biblical theology. We have gained an orientation toward this discipline by comparing it with biblical theology of the Old Testament. We have seen the precursor of New Testament theology in the developments that led to Jesus' teaching about the last days. And we have

explored how biblical theologians have treated Jesus' three-phase eschatology as a governing framework for all New Testament theology.

Biblical theology of the New Testament has helped us increase our understanding of the teachings of Jesus and his apostles in many different ways. But above all else, biblical theology has shown us how we are to live for Christ in the light of what he has already accomplished in his first coming, how we are to live for Christ in the power of his Spirit within us now, and how we are to live for Christ in the hope of his glorious return.

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LESSON FOUR

Contours of New Testament Biblical Theology

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Contents

Building Biblical Theology

Lesson Four: Contours of New Testament Biblical Theology

Faculty Forum

With
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students
Jean Mondé
Rob Griffith

Question 1:
Why do biblical theologians study the Old and New Testaments separately?

Student: Richard, why do biblical theologians study Old Testament and New Testament biblical theology separately?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, that's a good question, because that is what we're setting up in these lessons, that we're treating them as separate things. Historically, people who have done biblical theology have tended to just do what they studied before, and that is specialization in Old Testament or specialization in New Testament. That's one big reason. I think people just sort of make the shift from sort of standard studies in those two fields, and then when they start doing theology they do it according to those two fields. Now the famous person, or the really influential person we're talking about, Geerhardus Vos at Princeton, he did both. He has books on… In fact one of his books is the *Biblical Theology* [of the] *Old and New Testaments*. Now oddly enough, the New Testament section is only about that long, that section is about that long, but that's of course appropriate given that the New Testament is about that long. But then he had other books that people call New Testament biblical theology like his *Pauline Eschatology*, his little book on *The Kingdom of God and the Church*, a few things like that, that were specifically on New Testament themes. And I would also think George Ladd's book, *A Theology of the New Testament* is a good example of biblical theology of the New Testament; it has that focus. Some of Herman Ridderbos' works: *The Outline of Paul's Theology* or *The Coming of the Kingdom*. Those books are more New Testament oriented. But then you find others that are Old Testament oriented like Willem VanGemeren's *Progress of Redemption*, or Walter Kaiser's *Toward a Theology of the Old Testament*. Those are people who are doing their particular fields, and I think that that's probably the main reason.

At first though, we should say that early on, let's say maybe midway through the last century, people were working very hard to do the same kinds of things in the New Testament as biblical theologians did in the Old Testament. And so biblical theology was seen as a unified discipline, but then as things developed and certain attempts were made and faltering occurred, then they started splitting them between the two, so that when I was seminary, people would speak of OTBT and NTBT. And you try

to say those really fast and you'll get a sense of how things went crazy. OTBT of course means Old Testament Biblical Theology and NTBT New Testament Biblical Theology. So they really have become almost separate disciplines, though a New Testament biblical theologian will depend more on the Old because they do look at things chronologically, and so they know that the Old Testament does lay the foundation or is a prelude to that New Testament revelation.

Student: What are the similarities and dissimilarities between doing Old Testament biblical theology and New Testament biblical theology?

Dr. Pratt: You know, we go over those kinds of things in the lesson, but probably it's not altogether clear. So let me see if I can just sort of lay it out point by point. There are similarities, two big similarities, and then a third dissimilarity. I'm using now the categories that we used in the Old Testament biblical theology lessons. One of the big similarities is this coordination of act revelation and word revelation. Again, this distinguishes biblical theology as a discipline from systematics, which tends to focus just on word revelation, concepts that are spoken of in the Bible rather than acts of God. And so biblical theology does zero in on the mighty acts of God especially and how they are then interpreted by word of God in either before, during or after the events. And so you have those kinds of distinctions, and those distinctions are made in New Testament biblical theology, too, to a large extent.

A second big similarity is what we call synchronic synthesis. I mean, just like Old Testament theologians will chop the Old Testament into periods of time and try to bring a synthetic awareness of the theology that was going on in that period, that's what New Testament theologians have done, too, as they've practiced their discipline of biblical theology. That has proven to be very fruitful, too. Where the disciplines started differing from each other, or the point of departure between the two, it wasn't immediately noticeable. If you look at earlier centuries, you don't see them going away from each other, but nowadays you can see it very plainly — once it's said, anyway — and that has to do with what we call diachronic development.

There's a big difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament when you start tracing how themes develop, and the biggest difference is simply this: The New Testament doesn't have much history. It just does not have much time for things to develop. And that's extremely critical. It may seem silly at first, but if you were to look at certain forms of New Testament biblical theology in the past, especially from the Dutch, they tried to work the New Testament with a lot of extensive diachronic development. Some of them actually went through the life of Christ and tried to divide it up into different stages and to show theological development from one stage to the next to the next, and there's been a long history of people trying to show diachronic developments from Jesus say to Paul, or to Peter, those kinds of things. And so those things were enfolded for a while, but it became very clear that even though there is the passage of time, let's say from 4 BC with the birth of Jesus to let's say around 100 AD with the death of John the Apostle, there's a hundred years there. So things did develop and things moved forward in many respects, but it's not a

dramatic as it is in the Old Testament. Name some of the situations, Jean. Name some of the different situations that people in the Old Testament faced. You have Adam and Eve in the garden. What would be another situation?

Student: The people of Israel leaving Egypt.

Dr. Pratt: Right, leaving Egypt is big. That's different because they're marching along. Then they end up doing what?

Student: Well, meeting at Mt. Sinai for one.

Dr. Pratt: Meeting at Mt. Sinai. That's huge. That changes situations.

Student: They entered the Promised Land.

Dr. Pratt: Entered the Promised Land to fight a war. Oh boy, that's different than working through the wilderness.

Student: Monarchy. You have the monarchy.

Dr. Pratt: They have monarchs. Then they lose everything and go off into exile. Then some of them come back. And so you can see the transitions, the diachronic transitions are huge in the Old Testament. You go from where everything's wonderful to where things are really bad, to times when God's covenant people are wealthy, to times when they're poor, even imprisoned, even conquered, to times when they're conquering, to times when they hungry, to times when they're well-fed, and when they're proud or when they're humble, and so on, and so on, and so on. You find all that variety, and what that variety does is it makes Old Testament biblical theology very rich. This is fertile ground for saying how do things develop? How does the omniscience of God, for example, develop as you go through God's people going through periods of war or going through periods of plight and periods of wealth and health and things like that? See, now you've got a lot of work to do and a lot of fun things, and believe it or not, biblical theology can be fun in that way.

But when you come to the New Testament and you think about the people of God, the new covenant people, they're basically in the same situation. Now there are differences. I mean, there's a difference between during Jesus' life where he had just a few followers, maybe a few thousand at a time, in Palestine. That's one stage. You could say this is the Palestinian stage to the work of the apostle Paul which was not in Palestine, shall we say? So the shift from Jews to Gentiles, that's a big shift. And much could be made of that. Unfortunately, biblical theologians of the Old Testament don't tend to do a whole lot with that, but they certainly could. But what were the economic situations that the first century church faced? Basically the same, yeah? There were some that were wealthy and some that were poor. Generally speaking, they weren't the wealthiest around. They certainly weren't a nation that was marching through a desert ever. They weren't en masse travelling anywhere. They were

scattered around basically staying where they were. And so you have much continuity socioeconomically in the New Testament period that there's just not a lot you can do diachronically.

Student: Well it seems you have your major acts in the New Testament, you have the birth, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost. Then you see the spread of the church, but the next big act is…

Dr. Pratt: Way off.

Student: It's way off. It hasn't come yet. We're waiting for it.

Dr. Pratt: That's right, exactly.

Student: And all that takes what? Sixty years?

Dr. Pratt: Less than a hundred for sure; even in the broadest terms, less than a hundred. And so you will find biblical theologians making distinctions between the pre-death, resurrection and the post-resurrection period, for example. You will find that kind of thing, and that is important. The outpouring of the Spirit was something that was new, that was coming in the first chapters of Acts. And so there are distinctions to be made, but by and large, things were essentially the same during that short period of the New Testament. And that's why Old Testament biblical theology and New Testament biblical theology are so different from each other.

Question 2:
What do biblical theologians do with the New Testament?

Student: So if there's not the much diachronic development in the New Testament, what do New Testament biblical theologians do?

Dr. Pratt: That's great, because they've got to do something. Right? I mean, if you're committed to this idea that God reveals himself in actions and in words and that those are coordinated somehow, if you are committed to the idea that you can make syntheses of those things, which we have said they are, what do they do if they don't have much diachronic ground to work with? The answer basically is to sort of do a synthetic theology of the whole New Testament, a synchronic synthesis of the whole New Testament, and to realize, however, that within that there are going to be varieties. And this is what biblical theologians of the New Testament end up concentrating on the most. Now not all of them did that, especially early on, but now if you were to look at biblical theology of the New Testament, what you'll find is they'll talk about things like this, they'll say, what's the theology of Matthew? What's the theology of Mark? What's the theology of Luke-Acts? Or what's the theology of the Paul, or Peter, or James? And basically the notion is they're all, all of

those theologies, are talking about the same complex of divine actions and how they synthesize is different according to different writers of the New Testament. That's the key.

And so they spend most of their time working out the varieties of theological perspectives on that group of divine actions. Now what are those actions? Those actions are things like: Let's start off with John the Baptist, which is where most of the gospels do, the birth of Christ, the earthly ministry of Christ, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and then his glorious return. And basically, even though there is diachrony in that, those things happen over time, basically New Testament biblical theologians are asking the question, if you take all of that as a synthetic unit, how do the writers of the New Testament create their syntheses? And remember, even as far back as B.B. Warfield — earlier in another lesson, I think even the first lesson of this series — we mentioned that one of the contributions B.B. Warfield made was that there are manifold or multiple concatenations or arrangements of theology in the Bible itself. And of course that sort of spins us around in some ways because we don't think of the Bible as having multiple theologies, but this is precisely what Warfield said, and it's what New Testament biblical theologians concentrate on. For example, again, one of the standard texts for New Testament biblical theology is George Ladd's book The Theology of the New Testament and his chapters are actually marked out just like I said: the theology of Matthew, the theology of Mark, the theology of Luke-Acts, the theology of John and his epistles, Johannine theology, Pauline theology, Petrine theology, and so on and so on as he walks through the various writers. And what he does is he tries as hard as one can to distinguish them from each other. It would be very easy with the force of systematic theology behind us to sort of make all of these fit together neatly and nicely, but even as an evangelical, he works very hard to distinguish them from each other, as all of us are sort of used to doing nowadays.

Question 3:
Did biblical writers contradict each other?

Student: Wait a minute. Are you saying that the biblical writers contradicted one another?

Dr. Pratt: No, no, no. That's always not the case here. Now there will be some people who say that, yes. There are lots of even popular books, unfortunately, written these days that actually pit one New Testament writer against the other and say that their theologies are incompatible, or even competing with each other. They view the whole first century as this sort of competition among various writers and various church leaders; I've got my group, you've got your group, now let's see who has the best theology. That kind of thing. You know, they decide which is the best theology based on criteria that they bring to the text rather than being willing to submit to them. But no, we're not talking about contradiction, but we are talking about

difference, and there's a big difference between contradiction and difference. A person can look at something as complicated — and think about how complex this is: The birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and return of Jesus. Now all those things put together in a package, that's a lot of stuff to talk about.

So you can imagine that human writers even inspired by the Holy Spirit are not given omniscience about all of that. What they're given is God working through their backgrounds, through their own personalities, their own experiences, they're given certain angles or certain perspectives that are important to distinguish them from other people who are also inspired who have, nevertheless, different perspectives, and different emphases, and different vocabulary. I mean, it comes down even to vocabulary. And this is one of the critical differences between systematic theology and biblical theology that we even mentioned in the systematic theology series, and that is systematic theology tries to come up with a unified vocabulary. Now when you try to come up with one way to describe everything, every little piece of what let's just say the New Testament says, you're going to run into problems, because the New Testament doesn't talk about all those little pieces in the same way. They use different vocabulary to talk about the same things.

So when we as Christians, heavily influenced often by systematic theology, go to the New Testament, our tendency is to cram every single part of the New Testament into the vocabulary that's been adopted by a particular Christian tradition in its systematic theology. And that's where a lot of controversy comes up because people say, well I understand what the systematician was saying and using this term this way, but the systematician is not acknowledging all the varieties of ways in which that term is used in the New Testament, much less the Old when you add that. And this comes up in discussions about justification for example. You know, when Jesus is quoted in Matthew as saying, a man will be justified by every word that comes out of his mouth, using the word "*dikaioo*". Okay? Just like when Paul says that a man is justified not according to works but by faith, we realize that Jesus, a la Matthew, is using *dikaioo* differently than Paul was. Now if you've got a theology that has to have the word justification or justified used just in one way, you've got a problem. Add to that James who says that a man is not justified by faith alone but by works also, now you've got at least three New Testament uses of this word justification. And so how you bring all those into a systematic theology becomes very complicated. But that's what biblical theologians love to do. They love to push the limits of the New Testament's diversity.

Question 4:
How diverse are the theologies of the biblical writers?

Student: Okay, so what are those limits first of all? We're talking about pushing the limits of diversity, what are those limits? And how do we bring all these perspectives together?

Dr. Pratt: Well, that's great, because that really is ultimately even what B.B. Warfield was saying, see? Remember, he said that you've got these various theologies in the Bible — he was including the Old Testament also, so look for justification in the Old Testament and you'll find a lot more variety, even over that what we just said — but he was saying that systematic theology has to create this mega-system that allows all this diversity, or various theologies to have their right place, their voice as it were, within the system of theology that the church creates as a comprehensive structure for the Bible. And that is a very difficult thing. This is one reason why we have different denominations, because different denominations will take in their systematic theology, they'll tend to lean on one New Testament writer more than another. My own tradition tends to lean heavily on…guess who? Which New Testament writer? Paul, of course. Others tend not to do that so much.

So it really does depend on what that denomination's history is as to what part of the New Testament it leans on most heavily, and then they develop their own technical vocabulary in their tradition, and it becomes kind of their shorthand or jargon, and then that makes it hard for them then to bring other theologies of the New Testament into their jargon, or into their shorthand that they share with each other, see? That is one of the problems with a confessing denomination, or confessionalism, is that no confession can incorporate all that vocabulary. It has to pick and choose. It has to decide what its technical vocabulary is, and that creates serious problems.

It's also one of the reasons why people often these days are challenging some very important traditional protestant doctrines that really don't need to be challenged. What they're doing is they're arguing over how we should use these terms, and they're wanting to be more inclusive of the way that the New Testament uses those terms and then create, as it were, a mixed doctrine that sort of imbibes all of these, or includes all of these varieties. While that may be fun to try to do, it certainly is disruptive to say the least. If a branch of the church has had a technical definition that has in effect eliminated other options, it's very hard to get that church to accept the variety. And sometimes, we always have to remember that the terminology does not equal the concept. For example, I believe very strongly in justification by faith alone. I don't believe that the word justification is always used that way in the Bible, but I believe in the concept — that's different — of justification by faith alone that the Reformers emphasized, and so when I find the word justified used in other ways in the New Testament, like when Jesus says a man is justified by his words, then what I do is I don't try to make that a part of my doctrine of justification. I just simply acknowledge that words are important, and words make a difference. The same with James. I'm not trying to bring James' use of the word justification into the doctrine of justification. There's no need to do that. If you start doing that, then you're going to have some very serious problems.

Everybody picks and chooses what parts of the Bible they're going to develop their vocabulary, their shorthand out of. And there's nothing wrong with that because if you allow your vocabulary in theology to be as diverse as even the New Testament's

vocabulary, then, I often say, you're theology is going to be a confusing as the Bible itself. So what was the point of having theology to begin with? The point is to make it understandable, to communicate it, to fulfill the Great Commission. So we must be very careful not to allow the diversity that is there and that biblical theology emphasizes to call the shots, or play the melody, or play the rhythm that systematic theology has to dance to. It doesn't have to dance to that. Systematic theology represents a long history of traditional vocabulary, shorthand abbreviations that allow people to communicate with each other, and you don't have to bring all the diversity of biblical theology into your systematic theology.

Student: So would you say then it's the wider historical context of theology, or what the church has given us over history that should really set our boundaries?

Dr. Pratt: Well it sets the boundaries in the sense of not telling us what the Bible says in each particular case, but in how we use words and concepts technically. The shorthand we adopt. And if we give up the shorthand — in other words, if we don't have ways in which we can talk to each other or other Christians can talk to each other and understand what they all mean in a phrase or two — then what we end up with is a situation where you're having to define every single thing you say a hundred or thousand ways in order even to have a sermon or to have a lesson, and that gets to where it's crazy and confusing, and that's the last thing we want it to be.

Question 5:
How do we discover the different theologies of the New Testament writers?

Student: Now Richard, the New Testament does not give a systematic theology, we can say. How do we discover the different theologies in the New Testament from the Gospels and from the Epistles?

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question, because that is what we have in the New Testament. I mean, if you think about all the variety of genres in the Old Testament, you don't have quite that variety, but you do have letters and histories basically, the Gospels and Acts, and then the letters, and maybe you want to distinguish Revelation as apocalyptic, maybe, but it too is a letter to churches. So basically what we're talking about here is discerning different theologies, systems of theology in fact, perspectives on theology, syntheses, from those kinds of literature. And that's not an easy thing to do. A lot of people think it is fairly straightforward, but it really isn't, because you have to think of this as involving all kinds of different layers of theological reflection.

If you think, for example…Let's just take Romans as an example because it's the one that most people point to and say that is the part of the New Testament that's most

like a systematic theology. Now the people who say that are the ones whose systematic theology has been deeply influenced by the book of Romans, so it looks like systematic theology, of course. But in reality, the book of Romans itself is a letter, which means it's addressing pastoral issues that the apostle Paul believed were happening and needed to be addressed in the church in Rome. And if you look at the book of Romans this way you discover rather quickly and rather obviously that it's not an abstract, timeless, systematic theology, but rather it's a letter written to address certain needs. And if you think about how Romans works its way out, the need apparently, or the dominant concern Paul had in that letter was the relationship, oddly enough for Paul, the Jewish believers and the Gentle believers in the church in Rome.

You know, we often start off thinking of chapter one as talking about the doctrine of general revelation and total depravity of all people and those kinds of things, climaxing in Romans 3:23: All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Well, that's true enough. But the reality is the first three chapters divide between what Gentiles know and what their condition is based upon general revelation, and then what the Jews know and what their condition is based on the revelation of the law in Moses and the prophets. And so even that very first part starts off with the Gentile-Jew distinction and, in effect, in chapter 3 he ends up saying everybody is in the same situation whether you're Gentile or Jew. And in fact, he expresses even in Roman 3:23, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God", being justified by faith, meaning that everybody in the church here at Rome, whether you're Jewish or Gentile, you've all been justified by faith. Because you're all sinners. We are all sinners. And when you go to chapters 4, 5 and 6 and so and so on, he constantly refers to this distinction that is happening in the church between first class-second class, Jewish-Gentile Christians, and debunks it, and he proves it over and over again that Abraham was justified by faith prior to his circumcision, which means that Jews and Gentiles can have the same experience of God. You don't have to be circumcised first. And so on and so on it goes: all in Adam, all in Christ. And even the more practical chapters like chapter 14, they deal with issues of ceremonies and the observances of ceremonies that were common among the Jews versus those that were not among the Gentiles.

And so the book of Romans in one sense, let's say at the lowest level, the least abstract level, its theology is pastoral. It's addressing felt needs in the Christ at Rome as the apostle Paul was seeing it and trying to fix those needs. But now if you think about the book of Romans, you know that something's behind it. I used to give this exercise. I used to say take these three verses out of Romans 1 and tell me on the basis of these three verses, what are all the other things that the apostle Paul had to believe in order to have said those three verses? And the students would come up with lists and lists of and lists and lists of things he had to believe in order to have been able to say just what he said in those three verses. Well that's the reality. What Paul says on the surface, that sort of lowest level, the least abstract level at which you could look at Romans, assumes all kinds of beliefs, all kinds theological beliefs, as well as beliefs about humanity, as well as beliefs about language, as well as beliefs about culture, as well as beliefs about you name it! Just tons and tons of layers and

layers of things that were in Paul's mind in order for him to have been able to write that very practical theological letter. And what biblical theologians do, just like systematicians, is they tend to infer those layers that are behind or, as it were, above what is actually written in the letter itself.

I mean, what was behind? What did Paul have to believe to say what he said about Jews and Gentiles in the first three chapters, for example? Well he had to believe all kinds of things about God, and about revelation, and about people, I mean just all kinds of things. And typically, biblical theologians of the New Testament will focus less on that on-the-ground pastoral theology and they'll focus much more on the sort of abstractions that lie behind it, or lie above what Paul says in this letter. And so when they do that, then they can join the abstractions from this letter and that letter and that letter and that letter, and bring those abstractions together into a system of theology, a way of looking at theology that was characteristic of Paul.

I mean, when you compare Galatians and what it says on its surface with 1 Corinthians, they are very, very different. I mean, Galatians is emphasizing how salvation is by faith and how salvation is not about circumcision; it is not about the law, not about the law, not about the law, not about the law. Now you could summarize Galatians that way. But if you took Paul's theology and just built it out of Galatians and just did the abstractions out of that, you would have a very different theology than what is said in the book of 1 Corinthians, because in 1 Corinthians the apostle is very concerned that the Corinthians obey the law, that the Corinthians be observant of the morality of Christianity, and he's all the time questioning whether or not they're really believers on the basis of what they're doing; not on the basis of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but on the basis of what they're doing; not on the basis of whether or not they're requiring Gentiles to be circumcised, because that wasn't even an issue for them, though he does mention it here and there. But the real issue for them was, are you going to fail in the wilderness — 1 Corinthians 10 — like the first generation of the exodus did? Now you don't find that kind of talk over in Galatians, but you do find it in 1 Corinthians.

So, if you're going to build Paul's theology, you have to move to the abstractions behind what was necessary for Paul to believe behind 1 Corinthians to have said that, and what was necessary behind or above Galatians for him to have said that, and then you've got to bring those together into a unified perspective. What did he have to believe in order to be able to believe these things to have said those in those different letters? And then when you take his thirteen letters and try to do all of that at once, you can see how much you're building upon, building upon and building upon. And that's the way New Testament biblical theologians get the theological perspectives of New Testament writers. In effect, what they're doing is asking what did that writer have to believe in order to have said all these different things that he said in all these different gospels, or histories, or letters, or whatever it may be? That's the key. It is a matter of abstraction, but the abstractions occur out of the text in those ways.

Student: So it seems then many of the circumstances that Paul is dealing with throughout his letters really don't apply directly to our lives today, and so, if I hear you right, we should spend more time looking at the abstractions, looking at the presuppositions behind those events?

Dr. Pratt: Right, inferring what theological beliefs Paul had that allowed him to say those things or even compelled him to say those specific things. I mean, how many people in your church are really so lazy that they're not working? Probably not very many. There might be a few here and there, but it's not widespread in your church like it was in Thessalonica. I mean, they believed that Jesus had already come or was about to come, and so they stopped working and became busy bodies. And so Paul says those that don't work don't get to eat. Oh, well, that's great. Well, that was his pastoral application of something that was deeper, and it's that something that was deeper, that theological conviction that was deeper — meaning things like being responsible, serving God, those kinds of things — that has to be then applied to the church today in its various positions and situations. In fact, in some churches, what you might want to say is just the opposite of what Paul said to the Thessalonians. You might want to tell people stop working so much. Out of the same theological conviction that led Paul to say to the Thessalonians, you've got to work. And so it's very interesting how that happens, but it's those theological levels that biblical theologians are concerned with as they try to decipher James' theology, Peter's theology, Paul's theology, Matthew's theology. And it's very rich when you can do that. And through the decades, biblical theologians have done a lot of work in this. It's not like you and I have to start off with a blank slate and figure this out. They've done a lot of work, and we can begin to build and refine on what has been done before in these areas.

Student: But you're not saying that on the surface, the surface level text doesn't apply even though the situations are different. Just for instance, I'm thinking in Ephesians, Paul tells the person who steals to steal no more but to go out, work, and give. Is there an application of that verse to every believer?

Dr. Pratt: Well, in the sense that you'd tell everybody in the world, don't steal. But if you don't have people in your church that are stealing, then you probably wouldn't even bring that up. Okay? How's that? So the question might be raised, well what led Paul to say that? And what theological convictions did he have — like the authority of the law, things like that, thou shalt not steal — what were the theological convictions that led him to say that specific thing to those people? And now if we have people that match that, yeah, we say it again. But if we have people that are in a different situation, then we may be saying something very different in application in our day. It's a wonderful thing that biblical theology opens up, because it does not leave us with a simple way of just read the verse and do what it says. It asks the question, what was the theology behind the verse? Now live out of that as God wants you live now where you are today.

Question 6:
What is eschatology?

Student: So Richard, you talk a lot in this lesson about eschatology, and for the most part what I heard in the lesson are things that I'm not hearing from the pulpit on a regular basis. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, what is eschatology? It's a problem, because when biblical theologians talk about eschatology, they're talking about something that most people don't really understand. Most evangelical Christians don't. I mean, eschatology basically means the study of last things. So that much we've got. But Jean, when people think about the study of the last things, what kinds of things do they normally think about?

Student: The end times, the rapture, the millennium, the antichrist…

Dr. Pratt: What's going to happen to Israel and so on and so on. You know, are we about to have…Is this it? Is this it? I mean, if you watch Christian television at all, they are all the time talking about how everything's ready for Jesus to come back and those sorts of things. Yeah. For the most part, that comes from, believe it or not, the tradition of systematic theology, because eschatology is sort of the last category in traditional systematic theology because it has focused primarily on end time events, or for Christians, the second coming of Jesus and things that are associated with that. And that's where biblical theology has expanded the idea of eschatology almost to the point that it can hardly be recognized.

So that's why this lesson talks about eschatology or the study of last things in what might feel like a very strange way, and I think probably the best way to go about this is just to sort of start at the beginning with eschatology and just kind of sketch it out for a moment to see how biblical theologians came to this view. The word "*eschaton*" is a Greek word that comes from several different phrases in Hebrew but one that's especially important in Deuteronomy 4 is "*acharit-hayamim*", in the latter days or in the latter part of days, and that expression that Moses used in Deuteronomy 4 is used again by the prophets of the Old Testament. The reason for this is because they had view that the world's history was going to come to an end; it was reaching a climax, a culmination. And Moses spoke of those latter days as the time when Israel would come back from exile, and that's what the prophets used it for as well. They spoke of in the latter times or in the last days Israel will come back from exile. And that is the Old Testament background to what Christians think about.

And often Christians do associate the latter days with something happening to Israel. Now in my opinion, most of that is not correct, but that's what they do. And that's where it comes from. It comes from the fact that the Old Testament itself relates the *eschaton*, or the culmination of history, to the Israelites returning from exile, restoring the kingdom, and God's blessings being poured out on them and wonderful things

happening all over the world. And it's that basic idea that the world is going somewhere and it involves the restoration of Israel after the exile that the New Testament picks up on. And the New Testament uses that terminology, however, in ways that surprise lots of people. When they think only of the second coming of Jesus as *eschaton*, or eschatology, the New Testament doesn't think that way. The New Testament thinks of all the history of the New Testament beginning with John the Baptist, Jesus' birth, his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his second coming — all of those things are eschatological, because they all represent the culmination of history that Moses was talking about and the prophets were talking about.

And that's why when you look at eschatology from the perspective of New Testament biblical theology, you're not looking just at what are the signs? Are we close to the second coming? What are the things that are about to occur? How shall we interpret this war or that war, or this earthquake or that earthquake? Instead, what you're talking about is the whole New Testament, because the New Testament uses the term latter days or last days to refer to all of those events. It does not discount the second coming — no, that's a part of the last days — but the whole of what happened from John the Baptist until Jesus comes back in New Testament vocabulary is called the latter days.

Student: So, Richard, is this a matter of terminology then?

Dr. Pratt: In some respects it is. But what biblical theologians have done is they have actually identified the main or central concern of all New Testament writers as explaining how the *eschaton* unfolded in the life, death, resurrection, ascension and second coming of Christ, how the whole New Testament history is about eschatology. It became the biblical theologian's central concern of understanding how New Testament writers explained that, because it was not the way people expected it to be. And so when you think about New Testament biblical theology, in some respects, it's all about eschatology, all about the latter days, because it's all about the New Testament.

Question 7:
How did the doctrine of eschatology develop?

Student: Now Richard, you mentioned that the doctrine of eschatology developed diachronically. Could you speak a little bit more and help us to understand that?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, the reason I said that was because we understand, I think, that most of the other doctrines that we normally think of — the person of God, the character of God, those kinds of things, the morality, the moral standards of the Bible, various things like that — developed as the Bible went forward. They developed diachronically. But unfortunately, we don't understand that the same kind of thing

happened with eschatology. Eschatology was not something that was said once and then was just left alone forever. Instead, the concept of how the world would come to its culmination actually developed over time, all the way back — let's say you could start at Eden if you wanted to, because before sin came into the world, basically God tested humanity to see if humanity would go out there and be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, subdue it, have dominion over it. And theoretically, or hypothetically, if they had done that rather than rebelling against God in the garden, then it would have been a rather short trip and the *eschaton* would have come.

There was built-in eschatology even in the beginning so that what happens at the beginning aims toward that culmination. Of course sin came into the world and disrupted things, and so the way the world would reach that goal of God's kingdom coming to the earth, it's different now than it was before sin came into the world. And then when you come to the time of Moses, let's say. I mentioned Deuteronomy 4:30, but when Moses said "in the latter days," he now picks up a technical terminology in many respects and associates the end of time or the culmination of history with the return of Israel from exile, like the prophets did.

The prophets didn't think of things like the first coming of Jesus, the second coming of Jesus, what the apostles would do, this, that, this, that, and separating all those things out. Instead, they thought of the end times coming to a culmination just like Moses had said, and it wasn't until you come into the later prophets, especially someone like Daniel, where changes occur again. I mean, if you think about what Moses said, he said basically you're going to have the exile, then you're to have the *eschaton*. The latter days will come after that, a time of great blessing, eternal judgment, eternal blessing, that kind of things. When you come to the earlier prophets, that was their view. Basically, we're going to have this exile that's going to come, but when it's over, things are going to be great. We will have reached the last days, the latter days.

Now Daniel in Daniel chapter 7 is facing a problem, and the problem is that they are near the time that Jeremiah said the exile would be over. Jeremiah said in chapter 25 and 29 that the exile was going to last 70 years. Well here's Daniel in exile around 70 years, but nothing's happening. So he prays to God and he says please go ahead and bring us back and all these things, even though we're sinners; I know we haven't repented like we should have — because that was part of the requirement for the latter days to come, that Israel would repent — but he says please do this for your name's sake and for the sake of Jerusalem and those sorts of things. And God sends a messenger, Gabriel, who basically says, no way, it's not going to happen. Even though Jeremiah had said seventy years, Gabriel says no, it's going to be seven times seventy years. So it's going to take about five hundred years for all these things to work out and for the end time to come.

Question 8:
Did the prophets ever predict things that did not come to pass?

Student: Okay, so wait a minute. Are you saying then, in the case of the Minor Prophets, that they actually predicted something that did not come to pass?

Dr. Pratt: Well, yes. In fact in the case of Jeremiah, it did not come about as Jeremiah had said it would. Jeremiah was predicting that the new covenant and all these wonderful catastrophic and cosmic events would occur after seventy years, and that did not happen. Now the book of Chronicles and Zechariah both say that when Israel, a few of them did return, that this was in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, but not everything that Jeremiah said would happen happened. I mean, the culmination didn't occur, and so the words to Daniel were, it's not going to find its culmination in these seventy years like we first said. It's going to be multiplied seven times. And Leviticus 26 explains that, because God said in covenant with him that if you don't repent of sins, he'll multiply the punishment seven times, seven times, seven times, seven times, so you have the seven times extended even to the exile.

So around 539 or so Daniel is learning that it's going to be another 490 to 500 years, and of course that brings us up to the time of Jesus. Well, okay, so if you were John the Baptist and you believed that now we've come to the culmination, we've come to the *eschaton*, and that Messiah, the son of David is coming, and he's going to do certain things, you would have the expectation that Daniel had given you and even that Jeremiah had given, that once it came, it came. Period! Put a period at the end of the sentence! That it would come dramatically, it would come catastrophically, that judgment would occur along with the blessing of God, the eternal judgment and the eternal blessing would come together. And that is exactly what John the Baptist preached. He preached that the axe is at the root, it's ready to chop down the trees and throw all the wicked into the fire, and the blessings of the Holy Spirit will be poured out on the earth, and everything will be wonderful. That was his view. Of course it was. That's what he had inherited from Old Testament prophets. And this, of course, is the crisis of New Testament faith. This is what makes it all happen. This is why the whole New Testament in fact was written, and it is the fact that when Jesus came, he did not bring the culmination the way John the Baptist expected it. And so even in Jesus there's the development, and then there's the development of understanding even among the apostles as they write the New Testament. So that's what I mean when I say that the doctrine of eschatology developed through the Bible.

Question 9:
Why was John the Baptist surprised by Jesus' ministry?

Student: Now is the development that we are seeing in eschatology from Old and coming to the New Testament, is that the reason why John the Baptist, for example, was very disappointed when Jesus did not do what he was expecting him to do?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, it is utterly the reason, because John the Baptist was preaching and teaching that the end was near — he framed it in terms of the kingdom of heaven is near, the kingdom of God is near — and he said that this was going to involve both the chopping down of the trees and throwing them into the fire as well as the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which was something that the prophets had said like in Joel or Isaiah. And it's extremely important to understand the crisis that John the Baptist faced, because here he is, the man who baptized Jesus, here he is, the man who called him the Lamb of God, here he is, the man who staked his whole life and his whole ministry on the idea that Jesus was the Messiah, the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world. And so he naturally expected Jesus to make it happen.

Well what happens to John the Baptist? He ends up in prison about to have his head chopped off. And in Luke 7, while he's in prison, he sends two disciples to Jesus, as you know, and he tells the disciples to ask Jesus are you really the one or should we be expecting someone else? That's a natural question to ask, because John was not the only person who believed that once the Messiah came, he would do all of the eschatological judgments and blessings. Everybody believed that. Every God-fearing Jew believed that. They believed that the key event that had to occur was the coming of the great son of David, and the great son of David would eke out judgment on the earth, and he would also pour out his blessings on the earth at once, and John the Baptist expected that. So now he looks at Jesus' ministry. He is the servant of Jesus, and he's about to have his head chopped off, that doesn't make any sense at all. In fact, Jesus is going around doing things that are nice enough, you know, healing people, those kinds of things, feeding thousands of people. That's nice enough, but it's not what the Messiah is supposed to do from those frameworks, from the framework of the Old Testament prophets as understood by John the Baptist and everybody else in the day.

This is what's so critical. It is that John was surprised that Jesus' ministry did not unfold in this sort of catastrophic or cataclysmic way, and so he sends his disciples to Jesus and says, are you the one? And of course, Jesus responds by saying, well, go back and tell John the Baptist, and he quotes Isaiah, that the lame walk, the blind see, and the gospel, the good news is preached to the poor, the downtrodden. And in effect, as I said in the lesson, what Jesus is telling John the Baptist is, look, I understand that I haven't done everything you expected. I haven't done everything that everyone around me expects, but I have done enough, I have brought enough of the end time blessings — lame walking, blind seeing, the gospel being preached to the downtrodden, the poor — I've done enough of this for you to believe that I'm the one and that I will do the rest. And in some respects, that's the essence of Christian faith. The essence of trusting in Jesus is not that Jesus has done everything, because he hasn't. If what we see today in our world today is everything that Jesus is ever going to do to the world, then we picked the wrong savior. It's really that simple. But Christian faith is this: it's believing that Jesus has done enough of what was hoped for in the end to believe that he will do the rest in the future. And I hope that you feel that way about your own Christian life. Rob, do you have any difficulties in your

Christian life that might make you think that there's got to be more to it that than this?

Student: We don't need to start that list.

Dr. Pratt: It's a long list. But you know, let's face it. When Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Christ is not raised, then we're the most foolish people of all, we're the most pitiable in the world. By in large, American Christians don't understand those passages. And why not? Because we have it easy, we have it nice. In fact, to be a Christian in modern America, for a long time, has been sort of the way you get ahead in life. It's the way you become a good person, a good citizen, so you get all these wonderful blessings. So we really don't have all that much staked on the idea that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and that he's coming back. That's not that big of a deal to us. If he doesn't come back and if we find out he wasn't resurrected from the dead, then we would have to agree with Pascal, we still made the best bet because it made our lives better.

But that's not the way it was at Corinth, and it was not the way it was for first century Christians. They staked everything and endured suffering because they were committed to the idea that Jesus had done enough for them to believe that he would do the rest. And the resurrection was the proof he was coming back, you see? And so we really are the most pitiable people in the world if we are living for Christ in ways that bring suffering, as it should. If we are living for Christ as godly men and women, we will endure suffering for his name's sake. And so the loss that we have makes our faith in his resurrection and his return absolutely essential. And so we lose if he is not coming back, which is of course the essence then of Christian faith.

Question 10:
Will we be surprised by the details of Christ's return?

Student: I think I know the answer to this question, but do you think we will be surprised at Christ's return?

Dr. Pratt: Like John the Baptist was?

Student: Exactly. Is it going to unfold the ways that we expect?

Dr. Pratt: My own personal conviction is I think we're going to be surprised. Now I don't know what the surprise will look like. When you think about Old Testament prophecies, about the end times and things like that, and you would think about John the Baptist, the greatest of the whole Old Testament period Jesus says, they were surprised. They would have been utterly surprised. If Isaiah were to see Jesus, like John the Baptist, he would have been surprised that this was the way it unfolded. Not that it was contradicting of what he said, but it's not what he would have expected to

have happened. And I think probably in our day, because we have so many Christians speculating about how this event is going to lead to that event, and this things going to happen, we even have books written on it and movies made about it and things like that. Christians by in large have a long list of expectations of what they think is going to happen.

And for American Christians, it's often tied into American history, that America is somehow the last nation that's ever going to exist, or the last empire that's ever going to exist before Jesus returns. We might be surprised in a hundred years to find out that America was just one of those empires that came and went like every other empire came and went. And Jesus didn't come back just because America collapsed, and that will shock a lot of American Christians. A lot of Western Christians in Europe were shocked when Europe sort of collapsed, as it were, from its central position, and they wondered how in the world could this happen. We know that Christians in World War I thought that was the end. Christians in World War II thought that's the end. Christians with every major step that occurs in history think this has got to be the end. And the reality is that it never has been yet, and so we will probably be very surprised at the sorts of things that will prelude Jesus' return. And it probably won't even be us. Who knows? It may be our children, our grandchildren, our great grandchildren, but whatever the case, we do need to be ready to be surprised, because John the Baptist needed to be ready to be surprised so that his faith in Christ was not shaken just because Christ didn't bring the end the way John the Baptist and everybody around him thought that the Messiah would bring the end.

Question 11:
Why didn't the end times unfold in the way the Old Testament prophets had predicted?

Student: So what did cause Old Testament predictions about eschatology to unfold in unexpected ways?

Dr. Pratt: Well, they certainly did. Let's say that, okay? Because if you were to look at Old Testament prophecies as a whole, the prophets were true. They didn't say anything that was wrong. They said the correct things, what God inspired to say, and they're reliable because they are inspired prophets. But what they said about the end times didn't unfold exactly the way they said it. Now we have to remember first — let's just make this point — that from the very beginning there was always this endpoint that history was aimed toward, and the endpoint was that the earth would be made into a place that was appropriate for God to come and display his glory. That's what the New Testament calls the kingdom of God. Okay. So we know that that is the ultimate end of history. Moses and the prophets associated that with the return of Israel from exile. Daniel learned that that return from exile was going to be extended quite a bit, 490 years, 500 years or so. John the Baptist expected, okay, we're here now, here's the Messiah, so now what's going to happen. And then Jesus and the

apostles had to explain, no, no, that the end time is going to come stretched out over time in ways that John the Baptist had to learn to believe in, that it was going to come with Jesus's first coming — that we call the inauguration of the kingdom of God — the whole period that we're in now that I call the continuation of the kingdom, and then the second coming of Jesus, the consummation of the kingdom. So what the New Testament says about the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy was unexpected. You can't find Old Testament prophets who say, don't worry, the end times are going to unfold, inauguration, continuation, consummation. That's not what they said. They looked at it as one big package, and the New Testament then has to explain why it didn't come like they and John the Baptist thought it would come.

Well what caused those things to occur? What caused those changes to occur? It's a principle about biblical prophecy that we often don't realize is in effect every time a prophet speaks, unless a prophet gives an oath from God where God swears he's going to do something. Jeremiah 18 tells us that if a prophet says blessings are going to come to a group of people, any group of people, any nation, any time, that if those people rebel against God, then God may reverse what he says or delay what he says, or do any number of things in Jeremiah 18. He also flips it over and says if God says he's going to curse someone — a nation, a people, any time, any place — he can actually decide not to curse them because of their repentance.

As New Testament Christians, what we often read in the Old Testament as condemnations to judgment and promises of blessing, which is culminated of course in the *eschaton*, are really not condemnations and promises. They are threats of judgment and offers of blessing. So when prophets spoke, often what they were doing was threatening and offering, not condemning and promising. That's a very important principle to understand, because the way people react to a prophecy often affects — not always — but often affects the way the prophecy unfolds, how the prediction unfolds, as God reacts to human reactions. Just like God reacts to prayer, or God reacts to rebellion, things like that. Just because a prophet says I'm going to bless you doesn't mean that you're necessarily going to be blessed, because if they shake their fist at God, the blessing is off. And just like when Jonah went to Nineveh and he said in 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed, there's a threat of a curse. That didn't mean Nineveh had to be destroyed in 40 days, because when the people repented, God said, okay, I won't do it. Well the same kind of thing works with all of these prophecies about the end times. The end times will come one day because God's kingdom will come to the earth just like he said at the very beginning when he commanded Adam and Eve to fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over it for his glory. It will happen, and that's what the book of Revelation says will happen.

So the whole Bible is committed to this idea that one way, in some way, somehow, the kingdom of God will come to earth as it is in heaven. But the responses of people throughout history to those predictions and to those prophecies affect how that happens, and the New Testament is especially committed to this idea that it began with the first coming of Jesus, continues now, and it comes to its climax when Jesus

returns. But that is very much a question of how and when, not a question of whether or not the *eschaton* that the prophets promised was going to come.

Question 12:
Do historical contingencies continue to apply today?

Student: So does that mean that those historical contingencies, do they apply to us today?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, they are historical contingencies, not in the sense that God doesn't know they're going to happen, because God knows everything and God's in control of it all, so it's no surprise to him. I mean, from the beginning he knew that the *eschaton*, or the culmination of history, was going to come in those three steps or those three phases. So he knew it but he hadn't revealed it to us, hadn't revealed it to people. So the question is, alright now, here we are, the inauguration has occurred and here we are in the continuation of the kingdom of God, and we're looking forward to the consummation of the *eschaton*, or the kingdom of God. Do contingencies affect this? I mean, what we're in now, do they affect New Testament history also? Well, there would be disagreement among evangelicals over that.

For some reason, a lot of evangelicals believe that once you come to the New Testament, there are no more contingencies, there's no more factoring in human response. I've heard that from people before and I'm sure that they have their reasons for believing that. I don't. I can just tell you right up front I don't believe that. I believe that the New Testament offers a lot of things about the *eschaton*, or the great time of blessing and judgment, eternal blessing and judgment, that are postponed and affected by the continuing rebellion of people and by the repentance of people, Let me just give you an example: Jesus said to Jerusalem in Matthew 23, and he looked over Jerusalem and he wept over Jerusalem and he said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I would have gathered you like a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you would not." Now that's an historical contingency. Jesus came and made the offer of salvation to Jerusalem to exalt his people if they would repent. Well, what he says of course in Matthew 23 is you didn't repent. I would have protected you from the onslaught of the Romans, which is what he is talking about there, 70 AD. I would have gathered you like a mother hen gathers her chicks if you would have just come to me, but you didn't, and so 70 AD is coming.

Another thing that the New Testament frequently seems at least to be saying, and operating on the assumption of, is that Jesus' return is offered to Christians as a soon-to-come-about event. It's very difficult for me to read the New Testament and not see that New Testament believers thought Jesus was coming back fairly soon. Now I don't think that had a watch or anything, a stopwatch to say, alright, we've got five more minutes, or anything like that. But, you know, when the revelation of John ends by saying, "come quickly Lord Jesus," and Jesus responds, "I will, I'll come soon," I

don't think he meant by that that he was saying to John, "Sorry John, it's going to be at least two thousand more years." I think that he was offering to John and offering to the church and imminent return. Now the imminent return didn't occur. It hasn't occurred yet. It's been over two thousand years since Jesus said those words to John, and it's still not happened. Why not? Well, I think when you look at Peter and you look especially at 2 Peter 3 where, you know, that famous verse: "He is not slow as some count slowness, but is patient toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." Because repentance is the key for the great consummation, right? And what I think Peter is saying there is, look, the imminent expectation has been offered to us, but don't take the delay of the Jesus' second coming as a curse. It's really God's blessing to us because he's giving us opportunity to come to this fuller repentance that must precede his return in glory.

So Peter is actually saying to the church it's a gift that he hasn't come back yet. I mean, how else do we explain that people in Thessalonica that Paul writes to believed that Jesus was coming so soon that they had stopped working? And even some of them thought that maybe they had missed it. I mean, they were thrown into a theological conundrum by the fact that people were dying who were Christians. So Paul has to say to them, don't worry about the people who have gone before you. Those that have fallen asleep won't be ignored. In fact, on the resurrection day, they're going to be raised up first. They're resurrected before you and then you follow them. So he's comforting people that their mothers and their fathers and the children in Christ who had died had not missed the blessings of the *eschaton*. But why did they think that they had missed the blessings of the *eschaton*? It was because they expected an imminent return. It's just difficult to read the New Testament without that kind of expectation.

And so when people ask me why hasn't Jesus come back yet? I have to admit I don't know the answer except for some of these clues that the New Testament gives us. But those clues are we're messing it up. We are the reason for the delay. I mean, what should have been a bonfire, the gospel, that should have consumed the world had the Christians given the gospel to the world the way they were called to do it — it should have just taken the world like a great fire — this bonfire has actually ended up becoming a ring of fire. You know how you start a fire in the middle of a paddock or a field? If you've poured the whole thing with gasoline, it would all just go up, okay? But if it doesn't burn fast enough, then what happens is this one little fire in the center becomes a ring of fire as it goes through. So you have charred ground, then you have fresh ground, and you have the fire that's moving out like that. And isn't that the history of the Christian church? I mean, you can go to places — I often do, in fact — you can go to Turkey, and if you come out of the airport in Istanbul, there will be buses waiting for you that will have signs on them saying "Come see the churches of the Book of Revelation." Well, you hop on the bus — I've done it before — and you're taken to all these different cities that are mentioned in the first three chapters of Revelation. I remember one time asking the tour guide, "Well where do you think the church of Smyrna was?" And she looked at me and she said, "Probably over there

on that hill." And I in my skeptical way said, "Why do you think it was over there?" And she said, "Well because that's where the oldest mosque is."

So you understand what she was saying there? In other words, the Muslims had come and they had taken Turkey, and the Christian church didn't exist, so they built their sanctuary, their mosque, where the old Christian sanctuary used to be, which was the style and the technique. Of course, when Christians came back, they built them on top of the mosque and so on, back and forth, back and forth. But the fact is the churches of Revelation in the first three chapters that were apostolic churches, churches established by apostles, they do not exist. I mean, we are sending missionaries to places like Turkey, and there is the church there, but it's not the churches that were once there. And so there's a charred ground behind the gospel as it goes forth. And as the church is faithful, the fire burns hot. But when the church loses its fidelity to Christ, the fire burns down.

Now you can think of this in terms of how the gospel went to Europe, and it's basically passed through Western Europe at this point. I mean, there are Christians there, faithful, loving of Christ, but the fire is not there like it once was, and the influence of Christian faith. You can think of North America and the same thing. We see in our own day that the fire is burning out and that the ring of fire is now moving to places like Africa and the Far East, Southeastern Asia, places like that. That's where the fire is burning. Now our hope of course is that the ring will continue and come back to us one day. But I'm sure that eventually Christ and the Father will be kind to us and merciful to us, and Christ will come, because Jesus, when he comes back, he will make all things new and he will take care of everything we have left undone. There's no doubt that that's the case. That's the hope of Jesus' return. But prior to that, our goal is to do as much as we can with the gospel and not let this bonfire just burn into a ring of fire that just passes by, and then passes by, and then passes by.

Our hope would be that through repentance and by the power of the Holy Spirit, that we would see an awakening that would not just be in one part of the world or two or three parts of the world, but would be all over the world. That would be a wonderful way to welcome Jesus back. But if that doesn't happen though, he'll come back, and he'll fix everything. But our goal must not be to do the minimum. Our goal must be to do the maximum. And if we are repentant and humble and faithful, then that historical contingency will reap blessings for us and blessings for the gospel. That's why Peter says, "How then should we live in light of this great judgment that's coming?" He said we should "live holy and godly lives," hastening the day of God. So we bring this about by our activities, by our faithfulness or by our infidelities. And I just think that's the reality we have to face. So I think historical contingencies do apply not only to the Old Testament but to today as well.

Question 13:
Has the new covenant come?

Student: Okay, I'm a little bit confused about the new covenant.

Dr. Pratt: Yeah. You should be. We all are.

Student: In Jeremiah 31 he talks about the new covenant, the law being written on our hearts, but as I look around the church, it doesn't seem like that has taken place. So has the new covenant come or not?

Dr. Pratt: Well, I think we are persuaded by the New Testament — we call it New Testament because of the a association with the new covenant — that the new covenant has come, but I think that we have got to understand that while it has genuinely and actually come, that new covenant was one of the ways, one of many ways, that Jeremiah talked about the *eschaton*, the time after the exile when the glory of God would fill the earth, when the people of God would be blessed, and the wicked would be destroyed. Now that's the way Jeremiah looked at it. As we've said, that's what they believed was going to happen, that's how they understood it, but because of the effects of the intervening historical contingencies we've been talking about, what people do, the ways that prediction was fulfilled come out in different ways and unexpected ways. So new covenant is just one of many things that the Old Testament says is going to be characteristic of the *eschaton* or the end time.

The New Testament then tells us that the new covenant has come, but I think we understand if you look at what Jeremiah says is going to come with the new covenant, that everyone is going to know the Lord, everyone's going to have the law written in their hearts, that our sins are going to be gone from us as far as east is from the west. We realize that we have to take the concept of new covenant and take it through what the New Testament says about all other aspects of eschatology, and that is that it has come with the death and resurrection of Jesus and his ascension into heaven. I mean, that's what Jesus said when he said, this is the cup of the new covenant which is in my blood. Okay, so clearly Jesus is saying I have started the new covenant. But the new covenant continues now in us and in our lives and in the church's life, and the new covenant will come in its fullness, however, only when Jesus returns in glory. So when you ask questions like, has the law been written in their hearts? Well, the answer is yes, to some extent. But perfectly? No. Do we need for people to tell us to know the Lord? Well, will you know them from the least to great the greatest? Well, a whole lot more people than ever knew the Lord know him now, but not everybody that's one the planet.

Student: Well Paul also says, "How shall they know if they've not been told?"

Dr. Pratt: That's right. They've got to be told. Exactly. So this is part of the mission effort. So it's started, but it hasn't been completed during the continuation, and it will

only be completed at the consummation, because in the new world, the only people that will be here will be those who are saved in Christ, so they will not need to be told, repent, know the Lord, anything like that. And so the new covenant unfolds in those three ways like every other aspect of eschatology.

It's sort of like this. The New Testament describes the Old Testament term "new creation," or the "new heavens and new earth" in this way. The prophet Isaiah said along with this new covenant is going to come a new creation. Well, has the new creation come? Well, yes and no. Jesus comes as the light of the world, John chapter 1, Jesus comes bringing in new life, new creation. He introduces it in his first coming. 2 Corinthians 5:17, every time people because Christians they become new creation. "If anyone is in Christ, behold new creation; old is gone, new is come." But the book of Revelation tells us that the new heavens and the new earth, chapter 21, comes with Jesus returns.

So you've just got to always think of these Old Testament eschatological promises as unfolding in these three ways. All of them unfold in one way or another in these three ways. No matter what the issue is, you can almost be guaranteed that it will have unfolded in these three ways in the New Testament. And lots of people would prefer saying that the whole new covenant has come in all of its fullness and all of its glory already. I don't know how you can say that empirically or by reading the New Testament seeing what they said about it. At the same time, we don't want to say, well, everything's so bad that nothing's happened. It has happened. It's come, but it's still unfolding, and it's still spreading around the world. And it will come in its fullness when Jesus returns.

Question 14:
Does the New Testament contain different eschatologies?

Student: Now Richard, you talked about how the New Testament writers synthesized their theologies and how they have different theologies. As far as it is relating to eschatology, do they have different theologies? Are there different eschatologies in the New Testament?"

Dr. Pratt: That's a great question. Are there different eschatologies in the New Testament? That's a great question. Remember how we talked about each book of the New Testament sort of has an on-the-ground theology and then you can infer things behind that that were necessary to believe, behind that, behind that, behind that, and the more abstract you become, the further you get away from all of the specific things they say in their books? I think as you move down that ladder, you find more diversity among biblical writers, among New Testament writers. Matthew's version of Jesus's life on that level, on that very low level of his pastoral concerns, what he was trying to prove, what he was trying to emphasize, that is very different let's say than John's. I don't know how a person could say anything else other than that.

John's theology of Jesus' life at that low level of the pastoral, immediate concern he was trying to accomplish was different than Matthew's.

But now when you start extrapolating or inferring up to the higher levels of implicit theological beliefs, what they had to believe for those things to be true, then what you begin to find is that the writers move closer and closer to each other that they're not disagreeing on these higher levels of theology. For example, they all believed there was one God. That's rather abstract, and you really don't find that emphasized too much down here on the ground in their actual letters, but they all believed that. They also believed in the authority of the Old Testament, and that's a rather abstract, maybe middle-range sort of thing that they believed in. And so as you take all these different writings of the New Testament, more diversity is down lower, not up higher, not in the more abstract things. And the ways that New Testament biblical theologians look at this is basically that Jesus' teaching about the *eschaton* was so dramatic and such an upheaval, such a shock to the system of Palestinian eschatology, that this was a compelling force that drove and unified all the writers of the New Testament together. Now they express it in different ways, but as they moved into these things that Jesus taught about eschatology, then they have much more conformity or much more unity among them.

So this basic structure that Jesus came and started the last days, that the last days will continue until he returns in glory at the consummation, that is something that I think we would say — and certainly New Testament biblical theologians do — they would say that this is something that unifies the theology of the New Testament. In fact, one of the ways I think we can summarize the whole New Testament is to say that New Testament writers were explaining and applying the eschatology of Jesus. That's what they were doing. I mean, Jesus spent much time in his parables, like the parable of the mustard seed, explaining that the kingdom of God is not what you expect it to be; it's like the smallest seed that will one day grow into the greatest seed. Because the Jews in those days thought when the kingdom of God came, boom! It's here completely. All at once, judgment and blessings. It's done. But he went over and over this idea that the kingdom of God is going to be small and grow; it's something precious that only a few people get. It's a secret thing that will one day extend to the entire world. Over and over and over Jesus says this because it was such a hard, such an unbelievable concept.

And so when Jesus does this correction, as it were, of eschatological expectations, this became the heartbeat of New Testament Christianity, of the first century church. I mean, this was it. They were staking everything, even their physical lives on this belief that Jesus was right about this. And that's radical, because, you know, the Jewish zealots were telling them what we need to do to get Messiah to come is get swords and pick a fight with the Romans, and if we pick a fight with the Romans then Messiah will have to come and rescue us. The Pharisees were saying the way you get Messiah to come is by obeying the law, and if we're all just good enough, and if we could just all keep the Sabbath just once, all of us everywhere we are, well then Messiah would come. And the list goes on and on as to what they thought would

bring Messiah. But the Christians said the Messiah has come and he's away from here now; he's up in heaven ruling from his father David's throne right now, putting all his enemies under his feet. And you can hear the skeptical Jews in Palestine going, "Yeah, right. Whatever." Because that's a convenient thing, that Jesus has disappeared on us, and now we've got this church that's growing and going around causing trouble. But you keep on hoping that Jesus is coming back one day to rescue you."

Well the skeptical Jews would look at that and just say that's ridiculous eschatology, but the New Testament church based its whole faith on that. It was everything for them. Just like Christians often today will say that we based everything we believe in Jesus, every hope we have we put it onto Jesus. Well, that's true. It's a nice shorthand way of saying something that the first century church would have said — we're putting all our hope in the Jesus and what he told us about the end times, what he told us about the way God's blessings and judgments are going to come, that the blessing comes by trusting him now, and following him now, and enduring with him now, completing his sufferings now, so that you can enjoy the world to come, which was the Christian message.

So I think in many respects, the eschatology of the New Testament is unified but with different emphases depending on what letter you're reading and even what author, what terminology they'll use. Some people, for example, have argued that the gospel John and the Johannine Epistles, that eschatology is more vertical for him. It's the world above coming into the world below, as opposed to Paul, which is a little more linear. Well, that may be true. I don't know enough about it to have an opinion. But people have tried to make those kinds of distinctions, but those distinctions would be minor compared to the basic phasing out or unfolding of the kingdom of God that all Christians believe in.

Student: Sometimes in the church today there is a lot of emphasis sometimes on the book of Revelation as the ultimate — when we think of eschatology — there's a lot of emphasis on the book of Revelation. So what you're saying is that there should be an understanding of the Gospels, the Epistles, the book of Acts and to get a complete, very good understanding of…

Dr. Pratt: Absolutely. Just take Acts for example. In the beginning of Acts, Jesus is telling his disciples that when the Holy Spirit comes on them, they will become his witnesses everywhere, to the whole world. And the question of course is, well, did they do that? Well, by the end of the book of Acts when Paul's under house arrest in Rome, the gospel had gone to the whole known world at that time, the Mediterranean world. And that's why Luke is able to end his book in a rather abrupt way, but he ends it with the very last word of the whole text, the Greek text. The very last word is that Paul was under house arrest in Rome, preaching the good news of the kingdom and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ, and now the last word "unhindered" — successfully, without any hindrance. Even though from the outside it would look like he was greatly hindered because he was under house arrest, he was still proclaiming

God's kingdom, and he was teaching about Jesus as the Messiah, and he was doing it unhindered. He was, as it were, the embodiment of the fulfillment of what Jesus had told the disciples to do; he had taken it all the way to Rome, the capital of the evil empire of that day, and that is what the New Testament is about. It's showing how much the apostles had accomplished so that we can then build on their work and extend that kingdom in our day and so that Jesus will come back in glory and in all things.

Question 15:
What are some practical implications of biblical theology's focus on eschatology?

Student: So please talk for a second, what are the practical implications of the New Testament biblical theologians focus on eschatology?

Dr. Pratt: Yeah, that's great, because it can get pretty heavy and seem very abstract. Let me see if I can put it this way. If you have a church as they did in the first century, that was primarily made up, at least the core of it in most places, was made up of Jews who had certain expectations about the ways that the end of time would come, that Messiah would bring the age to come, and everything would be made new. Alright, but the truth of the matter was, as Jesus himself said, it's not happening like you thought. I've started it in the inauguration; it's unfolding now in your day, and one day I'll come back and finish the job. That was a lesson that you can get theoretically, but when it comes to practicality, there are all kinds, I mean, a million issues that are not answered. And that's where you get a lot of the issues that come up in New Testament Epistles. I mean, the question of whether or not Gentiles need to be circumcised. That's a question that comes up. Okay, Jesus has come, and the gospel has gone to the Gentiles, but are they full members or not? They're not circumcised. What do we do? That's a question that comes up because the eschatological situation was unexplored. In fact, in that particular case Jesus himself, as far as we know, never commented on the question. It was a question that the apostles had to figure out — by the Holy Spirit, but nevertheless pretty much on their own without Jesus giving them an idea of what to do about it.

Another question that might up is this: Alright, if Jesus has brought the end of time, and if Jesus has brought this kingdom of God to the earth, then why are things still so rotten? Why does Rome persecute us? Why are we, the followers of Jesus suffering like we are? Why are they putting us up on crosses and lighting Rome with our burning bodies? Why are they doing this? Another question that could come up is: Alright, if Jesus has come and he's started the kingdom of God, then why did my uncle die in the wagon wreck yesterday. Or why were my children crushed under the earthquake. This is one of the things it deals with in the book of Revelation, just the death of someone. How do I figure out all those things? And this is what the New Testament was written to answer, those kinds of very practical life questions. And

you can see that they do this by, as it were, framing everything in terms of how the end times are here, but they're not quite here completely yet.

And you can imagine if you and I were in a congregation of early Christians and we were facing certain situations that we would want to say, well, this is because the kingdom is here. And then when those good situations disappeared on us, then we would be very quick to say, well, I thought this is what was supposed to come with the kingdom. For example, let's say you became a Christian in the first century and you've got a great job. All of a sudden you're making lots of money and you're getting lots of respect in the community. Say you are in Ephesus and you're a wealthy person in Ephesus now after you became a Christian. Well, now you're naturally going to interpret that as being a proof that the kingdom of God has come, right? You were poor before you believed in Jesus, now you believe in Jesus, now you're getting all these benefits of the kingdom of God. Well that works very nicely for you until there's a famine or something, a plague on your fields and your crop doesn't come in that year, and all of a sudden now you're in the poor house. Now, how do you deal with that? And this was the reality of the situation that New Testament believers were facing.

And that's why, for example — this is a great example — this is why the apostle Paul writes such different things to different churches in the first century. Some interpreters, and I think it's right to say it this way, have identified at least three ways that Christians reacted wrongly to the first coming of Jesus, now the continuation and the second coming, because it's not obvious how you should react. Some Christians reacted by underestimating how many changes Jesus had already made, and one of those examples is the book of Galatians. Jesus had come, as Paul says in the first chapter and the first verse, he says, to deliver us from this present evil age. That was a Jewish way of saying to bring us into the kingdom of God. So that's the way he starts the book off. But then when he starts dealing with the issues in Galatia, he realizes that the people who are trying to make all Gentiles be circumcised don't realize that Jesus has changed the situation, that his first coming has actually opened the door to Gentiles, that Gentiles can now come in. This was the hope that the prophets had that all the nations of the Gentiles would stream to Jerusalem and find Messiah, and they would worship him and honor him, and it would be a great day when all the earth worshiped God.

Well, Jesus' first coming opened the door to that and it was happening. And so you have in this little Jewish sect called Christianity, this influx, this flood of Gentiles coming in, and in fact, while most Jews were rejecting it, the Gentiles were the ones accepting it. And so no one really knew exactly what to do with this. Well, some decided what we need to do is make them Jews because the kingdom of God is not here completely, so let's make them Jews by circumcising them. And Paul's basic argument in Galatia is you don't realize what Jesus has done. He has opened the door to all the nations, and now all the nations are welcomed as they are. Just like Peter had to learn with the unclean meat and the unclean animals. Eat the meat now. It's okay. You can go out there and be with the Gentiles. It's all right. You don't have to

stay away from them anymore. And so the radical change that Jesus brought in the inauguration of the kingdom was underestimated by the people of Galatia. That's why Paul thinks it's so important that he would actually call it a gospel issue, because the good news was Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God, the change. And when you deny that change by reverting back to Old Testament ways, then you're denying that he did have a dramatic change in the earth. Okay, so that was the problem in Galatia, basically underestimating certain aspects of what you should expect.

One other example, if I can give it while I'm thinking about it. Another thing that they wanted to do in Galatia was to emphasize sort of stark determination to obey the law, that these Gentiles need to start obeying the laws and the customs of the Jews also. Well, what does Paul emphasize? He emphasizes that morality comes, moral living comes, by being filled with Holy Spirit, by having fruit of Holy Spirit, by keeping with Holy Spirit. When you sow seeds of the spirit, then you'll reap eternal life, that kind of thing. Where does all this emphasis on the Spirit come from? Well, it's that eschatological hope that the Old Testament prophets had about the presence of Holy Spirit. So in the Christian church there is this awareness and conscious dependence on the power and the fruit of the spirit at work in you in ways that was never before, because Holy Spirit had been poured out in such abundance. And so Paul's saying again, if you think that Christian morality is a matter of keep these rules and let me add some extra ones to you to make it even harder, then you're missing the boat. You've missed the dramatic change Jesus has brought. Okay, so they underestimated what Jesus had done.

The Corinthians, however — many of them, not all of them because it was a mixed group — had overestimated what Jesus had done. They were like you when you became a Christian. You got the good job and started making money, and you started moving up in the societal ranks, and you became an important person in Corinth, and people liked you. They wanted to be around you. You could throw money around like you wanted to. You had nice clothes on, drove a nice car, those kinds of things. And so you were absolutely convinced in that condition that God really loved you, and that the kingdom of God that Jesus brought has really just been poured out in your life in ways that everybody else hasn't even experienced yet. So you're way ahead of the game. So they were overestimating how much of God's blessings of the kingdom they had received. And because they were overestimating, they began to think that the fact that I'm rich means that God really likes me. But the reality is that wealth and fame and popularity and status are not proofs that God likes you necessarily, but they are proofs that God is testing you — to see what you'll do with it, which was what Paul says to the Corinthians. In the last chapter of 2 Corinthians the apostle tells them that they are in Christian if they pass the test. And that's the question, are you going to pass the test or not? Because status and wealth and those kinds of things are not God's blanket approval, they are God's way of testing us to see where our hearts are. Are we really in Christ or not? So when bad times come, do we think God has deserted us? You know, when you don't have good health, do you think somehow the kingdom of God hasn't come? That's the problem.

And so the Corinthians, many of them, had overestimated what was going on in their lives and how much of the kingdom of God was present with them. And I think that if you just take those two books, Galatians underestimating, and Corinthians overestimating, you can see the practical problem with New Testament eschatology. It doesn't answer the question. It has to be determined on an individual case, on a local case, in a church life, because things go up and down, left and right, sideways, upside-down all the time in the continuation of the kingdom while we wait for Jesus to come back. And so it becomes a very practical and pastoral issue. Have you ever known people that think they have gifts of the Holy Spirit, for example, that set them above all other Christians? You ever known people like that? Like who? Like what kinds of people?

Student: I don't want to name names.

Dr. Pratt: Not individuals? You can talk about movements.

Student: Sure. Charismatic movements.

Dr. Pratt: Charismatic movement is one of those. I was once charismatic, so I can say this very plainly and very easily that many charismatics, not all, but many Pentecostals and charismatics think that they are somehow a class above all other Christians who don't speak in tongues and who don't see prophecies and don't have miracles happen every Sunday in their church. Well, that's not necessarily the case. In fact, if those things are happening in a person's life, they are the blessings of God, to be sure, but it's not a blanket approval of who you are and put you ahead of everybody else. That would be overestimating. Instead, it's a test to see what you're going to do with it. Which is why Paul tells the Corinthians, you know, if you speak in tongues without an interpreter, just do it at home; edify yourself at home, don't bother the church with all of this. Now, I know of other groups, though, that are equally guilty of overestimating how much of the *eschaton* they have in their lives, and that would be Christians who focus on doctrine and who think that somehow having the right doctrinal system makes you a first-class Christian, and everybody else that doesn't understand all the deep doctrines that you understand are somehow second class. That's also over-realized eschatology, which Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians. You remember how he does that?

Student: In chapter 13.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. He says that we know in part just like we prophesy in part. And our knowledge, our theological insights are just like looking in a dim mirror at the truth. You know, it's just a fogged-up window. You're not really understanding things as much as you think you are. Now we all ought to do the best we can, but it doesn't set us up as better Christians just because we may know a little bit more. In fact, the apostle says that whether you speak in tongues or prophesy or have all the knowledge, all the wisdom and everything, if you don't have one other thing then all of that is just a bunch of trash.

Student: If you do not have love…

Dr. Pratt: If you do not have love. Now, can you imagine why he says love? Let me remind you of what he says in 1 Corinthians 13; He says knowledge will depart, knowledge will pass away, tongues will pass away, prophecy will pass away. So all the things that we think make us so special will pass away, but he says three things abide: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love. Now, why is love greater than faith and hope?

Student: It will last. We will not need faith and hope.

Dr. Pratt: That's right. You see, faith will one day pass away because it will be sight. Hope will pass away because when Jesus comes back it will be realized. It won't be hoped for anymore. It will actually happen. But the one thing, the one ethical moral standard and reality that is both now that Jesus has come, in the continuation, and will continue even after Jesus returns is love. And so what he's basically saying to the Christians in Corinth is if you really want to be a first-class Christian, you need to love. And don't put it on the prophecy. Don't put it on the tongues. Don't base it on your wealth. Don't base it on your knowledge. Don't base it on all these other things that the world judges things by. Base it on your sacrificial love for others. And if you've got that, then you really do have the end time into your life. And is there any better example of that than Jesus himself, the eschatological man whose life was full of love for others? And even the apostle Paul who gave his life for others? And we're called to do the same. And so it's just very important to realize this is how practical the eschatology becomes in the New Testament, that how do you decide that faith, hope and love are the three things that continue but that love is the better of these three? It's because of your eschatology. It's the one thing that goes all the way through this unfolding of the eschatology. And so it becomes extremely important.

You know, when you start thinking about, for example, people that underestimate the coming of God's kingdom in this world today. We have people who do that, too, who want to not just as we said with knowledge and tongues and prophecies want to think they're high class, they also want to say nobody's high class, everybody's low class, and what you've got to really do is get back down to being serious about your religion which mean what? Obeying. And then on top of obedience to the laws of God in the Bible, they start adding more and more and more and more and more rules, and this will prove that you're a real Christian. Well see, people who load up others with more and more and more rules are actually denying that Jesus has come and changed the world because, as Paul says, we are set free from those kind of bondage, we are set free from those kinds of things to live in the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

And so when you find church traditions that have practically no place at all for the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit, for the conscience of the believer, for the believer seeking a personal walk with Holy Spirit and empowerment and filling of Holy Spirit, what you're finding is Christians who are denying that Jesus has changed

the world. Now how many times have you seen churches like that? Like every day? I mean that's exactly what we do. We call people to Christ and say come to Christ and he'll save you from your sins; now let me give you all the rules. And now the rules are good, the ones that are in the Bible, they're good and they're helpful to us. But when we start adding the others on top of them — like the way you should dress, the way you should talk, and the way you should live, and so on and so on like we do — we somehow get this false piety that really imprisons people and denies that Jesus has come and gives his Holy Spirit to believers to empower them and lead them. And so any church that diminishes the role of Holy Spirit is diminishing how much Jesus has changed the world.

And so these things are very practical in the New Testament. And that's where the New Testament gets all of its lovely, wondrous, practical lessons. It comes out of, it flows out of that eschatology. Be careful because between the first coming of Christian and the second coming of Christ, it's a balancing act that you constantly have to readjust, because life's circumstances are not what you expect them to be. And so when you get sick, when you become ill or your child becomes ill, I know that's not what you expected Jesus to do for you, but you've got to be able to face it. When you become wealthy, you were hoping he'd do that, but when he did it, you've got to be ready to face it like he wants you to. And so eschatology is extremely practical if we do it the way the New Testament does.

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