

**November/December 2006 Volume 3, Issue 9**

### **Editor's Note**

"It is certainly not without significance that God has embodied the contents of revelation, not in a dogmatic system, but in a book of history," remarked the so-called grandfather of biblical theology Geerhardus Vos over one hundred years ago. There's a *dramatic* difference, in other words, between a god who simply drops oracles from heaven, and one who takes the elements of history itself (people, nations, events, institutions, mighty acts), gives shape to those elements, and, along the way, provides a verbal interpretation through key actors (see Deut 4:32ff). What's more, he then shows up and says, "This is all pointing to me!" (see Luke 24:25ff).

In seminary, I was told in preaching class to keep an illustrations file. That's fine. But I hope you know, pastor, that your church already has such a file, one with thousands of illustrations that are all sub-plots in a larger drama: the drama of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. The question is, do you know *how* to begin at any one of the Bible's thousand sub-plots and relate it to the grand drama? Do you know *why* this is critical if you want a church of Jesus lovers and not Pharisees?

This issue of 9News is dedicated primarily to proving Vos' words—"certainly not without significance." More than musings on methods, marketing, or music style, pastors and church leaders need a solid grasp of biblical theology.

Graeme Goldsworthy, Bruce Waltke, and the other participants of the pastors' and theologians' forum warn preachers what will happen in their congregation's life if they don't know their biblical theology. So does Tom Schreiner in part 1 of his contribution, after which he describes exactly what biblical theology is, and how to *do* it in our preaching. James M. Hamilton Jr., tightening the screws, proposes that our biblical theology should center on God's glory in salvation through judgment. We then offer a few thoughts on the difference between the "gospel" of biblical theology and systematic theology, as well as several resources for you and your church members.

But first, see if you don't find yourself praising God for his irresistible work in creation and new creation, as traced out by Michael Lawrence.

--*Jonathan Leeman*

## **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**



### **Where Is Your Story Written?**

**Page 4**

Conventional wisdom decries all grand stories of life and history. But Scripture presents the ultimate story of God's work in creation and movement toward a new creation. Michael Lawrence introduces his series in biblical theology with five short articles on this grand story which encompasses everything, even you.

- Everyone Loves a Story (Part 1)**
- The Story of Creation (Part 2)**
- The Themes of Creation (Part 3)**
- The Problem of Creation (Part 4)**
- The Destiny of Creation (Part 5)**

*By Michael Lawrence*



### Preaching and Biblical Theology 101 (PBT-101)

Page 15

Feeling uncertain on why and how biblical theology should inform your preaching? Take Professor Schreiner's 3-part class on the topic. If you're just looking for tools for your toolbox, jump straight to part 3. Quizzes held every Sunday.

-Diagnosis—The Problem with Much Preaching Today (Part 1)

-Discovery—What is Biblical Theology (Part 2)

-Direction—How To Do Biblical Theology When Preaching (Part 3)

By Thomas Schreiner



### The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment

Page 23

At the heart of biblical theology is the glory of God in salvation through judgment, says Hamilton. Okay, we said to him, that sounds good. But what does that mean for the pastor when he goes to work on Monday?

By James M. Hamilton Jr.

### A 9News Forum

Page 27

We asked a roundtable of pastors and theologians one question:

**"In what ways will a congregation's understanding of salvation and the gospel be limited if their pastors do not have a good grasp of biblical theology?"**



Answers by Andrew Davis, Graeme Goldsworthy, Phil Johnson, Aaron Menikoff, Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., and Stephen Wellum. A special, extended response from Bruce Waltke



### Biblical and Systematic Confusion Yields Gospel Delusions

Page 33

Does the gospel = "the proclamation of God's kingdom" or "penal substitution"?

Distinguishing our biblical from our systematic theology helps us answer that question.

By Jonathan Leeman

### Recommend Books on Biblical Theology for Church Members

Page 38

9News has compiled a list of books Capitol Hill Baptist Church recommends to its members and visitors on the topic of biblical theology.

## CONVERSION



### One of the Dirtiest Words Today: C-----n

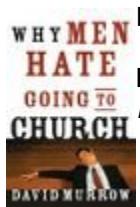
Say the word "conversion" in public today and call condemnation upon your head. But is it biblical? Is it helpful for believers and unbelievers?

By Brad Wheeler

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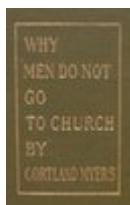


## WHERE THE MEN ARE MEN



**Book Review:**  
*Why Men Hate Going to Church*  
by David Murrow  
Reviewed by Jamie Dunlop

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**Book Review:**  
*Why Do Men Not Go to Church?*  
by Cortland Myers  
Reviewed by Ken Barbic

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**Book Review:**  
*Manly Dominion: In a Passive-Purple-Four-Ball World*  
by Mark Chanski  
Reviewed by Owen Strachan

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## QUOTABLE QUOTE

"It is certainly not without significance that God has embodied the contents of revelation, not in a dogmatic system, but in a book of history, the parallel to which in dramatic interest and simple eloquence is nowhere to be found. It is this that makes the Scriptures speak and appeal to and touch the hearts and lead the minds of men captive to truth everywhere...It is this that brings the divine truth so near to us, makes it as it were bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, that humanizes it in the same sense that the highest revelation in Christ was rendered most human by the incarnation."

Geerhardus Vos, in his inaugural address as Professor of Biblical Theology in Princeton Theological Seminary delivered on May 8, 1894; "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," in Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (P&R, 1980), 23.

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## Where Is Your Story Written?

*By Michael Lawrence*

- Everyone Loves a Story (Part 1)
- The Story of Creation (Part 2)
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## Everyone Loves a Story (Part 1)

Everyone loves a story. Whether our taste runs to Michener or Grisham, Shakespeare or Tolkien, fiction or non-fiction, there's something about a story well-told that draws us in.

But it's not just the pull of narrative. A good story is peopled with characters whose lives become windows—windows into another world, and windows into our own interior world.

## OUR OWN STORIES

I think that's why we all love stories. Stories help us make sense of our world and ourselves. In fact, when I wanted my young bride to understand what it meant that she had married a Southerner who had left the South, but had not stopped being southern, I read her stories from William Faulkner, Ferrol Sams, and Joel Chandler Harris.

In our post-modern world, we've been encouraged to give up the search for a narrative that will make sense of our lives and instead get on with the business of living, however we decide to define it. What's more, if we find a narrative that works, we're told to keep it to ourselves. We shouldn't oppress others with our vision of life, our sense of meaning, our meta-narrative.

Of course, the problem with this view of things is that it doesn't work, nor does it square with our experience. Whether we're from the East or the West, religious or non-religious, we all make sense of our lives not just by reading stories, but by telling them—stories about where we're from, who we're related to, and what we do. And our particular stories take on added significance as they are connected with the stories of others.

"I'm a white American who grew up in the post-civil rights South."

"I'm a Kenyan who grew up in post-colonial East Africa."

"I'm a former Muslim who has converted to Christianity."

"I'm a 3rd generation American-born Chinese."

Each of those summaries connect an individual's story to an even bigger story—stories that define us, that shape us, that provide meaning and purpose and order to our lives.

## GOD'S STORY

The biggest stories that any of us tell are the stories that connect us, not just with a family, a nation, or an ethnic group, but with God and the cosmos. After all, we're not the only ones who tell a story that gives meaning to life. In the Bible, God tells a story.

Now when I refer to the story in the Bible, I don't mean that it's fictional, any more than the story of your life is fictional. What I mean is that the Bible provides us with a narrative that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It's the narrative of God's words and actions in history. And it's not just *one* narrative among many. It's *the* narrative of everything, because it begins in the "moments" before time itself begins, and it ends at the "moment" just after history draws to a conclusion. And though the narrative sometimes focuses in on a single family, or even an individual, along the way it sweeps into its story the totality of the human race. That means that my story and yours are caught up inside this narrative.

Far from being an ancient religious text, of interest only to antiquarians and scholars, the Bible is as contemporary as we are. What's more, we will never make sense of our own stories without understanding how we fit into God's.

## THE TASK OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

To understand the Bible as a single divinely-inspired narrative, a revelation of God's purpose and plan for humanity that unfolds in time and space, is the task of biblical theology. More than just theology that is biblical, biblical theology attempts to understand God's revelation as it progressively unfolds in history and culminates in the person of Jesus Christ. It tries to understand how the Old Testament points forward to and prepares us for the New, and how the New Testament is contained in the Old.

If I had to point to a single verse to justify these claims, I might point to Luke 24:27: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

Or perhaps it would be 1 Corinthians 10:6, where Paul, referring to the events of Israel in the wilderness said, "Now these things occurred as types [examples; *typos*] to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did."

Or maybe it would be Hebrews 10:1, where the author says that the old covenant was a shadow pointing to a greater reality: "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves."

You get the idea. Biblical theology is an attempt to understand the whole Bible as Christian scripture telling the story of Christ.

Over the next few articles, we're going to embark on an exploration of biblical theology and its application to the life of the church. By looking at five different themes of this narrative, beginning this issue with the theme of creation, my goal is to put the whole story of the Bible together, from Genesis to Revelation. In so doing, I hope we will not only understand the Bible and its message better, but also our place within it, and the future that awaits us—a story already written but not yet completed.

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## The Story of Creation (Part 2)

The first thing to notice about God's story is that it begins with creation and it ends with a new creation. If nothing else, this suggests that creation is crucial to understanding who God is and what he is about.

## THE STORY BEGINS

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1).

Genesis 1 provides the cosmic overview. Everything that exists comes into being at God's command.

As we move into Genesis 2, the story focuses tightly on the details of the creation of mankind, the very first marriage, and the responsibilities entrusted to men and women. Everything is good. Everything is perfect. Everything is just as it should be.

## JUDGMENT MIXED WITH MERCY

Then tragedy strikes. Incredibly, Adam and Eve rebel against the One who gave them paradise. In judgment and mercy, God thrusts them out of the perfection of his presence in the garden of Eden, into a created world that is now cursed and fallen.

As chapter follows chapter, things go from bad to worse, until we're told that

The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them" (Gen 6:5-7).

What follows these chilling words is the flood. It's judgment day for what Peter called "the world that then existed" (2 Peter 3:6, rsv). But it is also an act of re-creation, at least in part. Once again, the earth is formless and void, covered by the waters of the deep (cf. Gen. 1:2). What's more, the earth is washed clean, as it were, of mankind's sin. God now commissions Noah and his family just as he had commissioned Adam. Echoing Genesis 1, they are told to "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth...Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything" (Gen 9:1-3). A new world—our present world—emerges as God once again put boundaries between the land and the sea.

But though the world is externally cleansed and recreated, internally the hearts of men and women are not changed. Within a few short years, sin again tears Noah's family apart. By Genesis 11, humanity's prideful wickedness asserts itself once more, followed by another act of God's merciful judgment: he confuses their language at Babel and scatters them across the face of the earth in order to slow the progress of their wickedness.

## MORE GRACE, MORE REBELLION

At this incredibly low point in the story, with mankind not only alienated from God, but also permanently alienated from one another, God's creating activity profoundly changes the course of human history. God speaks, and he creates, not a new world, but a new man. He takes the pagan idolater Abram and, by his irresistible call of love, changes his heart and his name. Abram becomes Abraham, the man who believed God and followed him. God then promises childless Abraham and his barren wife Sarah that he will make their family into a great nation. Then, according to God's promise, not only do they conceive a son, but their grandson has twelve sons. Before long, you can't even count all their descendants. From a single man and a single woman, they have multiplied and been fruitful and filled the land God has put them in.

The story rushes on. This nation of Abraham's descendants, Israel, is enslaved by another nation. And so God sends his prophet, Moses, to speak God's words to Pharaoh. God speaks, Egypt is judged, and the nation of Israel is liberated.

Only, they aren't quite yet a nation. They are more a loose collection of tribes. At Mt. Sinai, therefore, God speaks again. By audibly speaking, God creates Israel as his special people, his chosen nation out of all the peoples of the earth:

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites" ... And God spoke all 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" (Ex 19:3-6, 20:1-3).

God also promises to settle the people of Israel in a land flowing with milk and honey, a veritable garden of Eden, where former slaves can finally rest.

Incredibly, the people rebel, not just once, but again and again (Ex 32; Num 11-14, 16, 21, 25). God judges the whole generation, letting them die in the desert, and then recreates the nation again with their children. He establishes them in their own land, the promised land of rest, and eventually raises up for them a great king, David, who gives them rest on every side from their enemies. But again, like the generations before them, like Adam and Eve at the beginning, the nation rebels. This leads first to division and finally to judgment and exile. Scattered among nations whose speech it does not understand, Israel has recapitulated in her own history the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

But then, once again, God's creating grace intervenes. A remnant of the nation is brought back from exile. The Temple is rebuilt and the walls of Jerusalem are restored (Ezra & Nehemiah). But something is missing. The Temple may be rebuilt, but it's empty. God is not there. Jerusalem's walls may be restored, but the throne of David is a shadow of its former glory, and soon sits vacant.

## THE INAUGURATION OF A NEW CREATION

Until one amazing day, the creator himself appears in the form of a man. Echoing Genesis 1, the apostle John tells us,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men....The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-4, 14).

That Word was Jesus, God Incarnate. In his life, he spoke and the blind could see and the deaf could hear. And though wicked men crucified and buried him, the creator who had life in himself could not be kept in the grave. Jesus rose from the dead, and with his resurrection, inaugurated the New Creation, a work that continues today.

Through his word, the gospel, Jesus resurrects dead sinners in newness of life and makes them new creatures (Eph 2:1-9).

Through his word, the gospel, he calls his people into a new humanity, a holy nation, what the author to the Hebrews, echoing Exodus 19 and 20, calls the assembly and church of the firstborn (Heb 10:22-23).

And through his word, the gospel, Jesus the creator will finish his work of new creation. Evil and sin will be finally and forever judged, and God's people will be purified from all their wickedness and dwell with him in rest forever in a new heaven and a new earth. As John saw it,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne

saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true" (Rev 21:1-5).

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## The Themes of Creation (Part 3)

Knowing the story of creation is important. But if we as preachers intend to apply it to our lives and the lives of our congregations, we need to not only know the story, we need to understand what it means.

### GOD CREATES FROM NOTHING

As we think about the creation story's significance, several themes become apparent. To start with, *God created everything from nothing*.

- Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."
- John 1:3: "Through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made."
- Col 1:16: "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him."

What this means is that God is the owner of creation: he made it, it's his. Regardless of what we think about the mechanics or time frame of creation, God created it all, including you and me.

One of the implications of this is that he makes a clear claim on our lives. This is why there is so much heat in the arguments about evolution and intelligent design. The public debate is not just a battle for intellectual integrity or the scientific enterprise. It's a battle for independence from God. The irony of course, as the story makes clear, is that liberty from God turns out to be nothing more than slavery to everything else, not least our own passions, desires, and failings.

### GOD CREATES BY HIS WORD

But not only did God create everything from nothing, *God also created everything by his Word*.

"And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3).

If you and I make something, we need raw material to work with. We'll have to expend effort and energy. If it's complex, we'll need help. Not so with God. At no point has God ever been frustrated in his creative plans or designs. He did not have to struggle to create anything, nor has he ever needed the help or cooperation of others. As Paul says in Romans 4, "He calls things that are not as though they were"; and then they are. God creates by speaking.

When the Bible refers to God's Word, it's not necessarily referring to an audible voice. Rather, God's Word is the expression of his wisdom, power, and love. We have it in written form in the Bible. But ultimately, as Hebrews 1 tells us, God "has spoken to us through his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe" (Heb 1:2). John says the same thing at the opening of his Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Jesus Christ is the creator of everything because Jesus Christ is the Word by which God creates.

This also means that whenever and whatever God creates, whether it's light or life or spiritual life, it's an act of powerful, irresistible grace. Nothing forces God to speak. But when he speaks, things happen. It's not just that the potentiality for things is created. No, things happen. Nowhere is the gracious power of

God's creating activity more vividly illustrated than in Ezekiel 37. There, God instructs Ezekiel to speak God's words to a valley of dry, dead, bleached bones. When he does, life enters into those bones and they get up.

We see the same in John 11. Jesus calls out to the corpse of Lazarus, and Lazarus gets up and walks out of the tomb.

The bones didn't say to Ezekiel, "I don't want to get up." Lazarus didn't say to Jesus, "Not now, ask me again next year." No, when the voice of God rings out in gracious, creative power, not even death nor unbelief can resist his power.

This is why we should preach the Bible expositively in our churches. We could do lots of video and song and dance and entertain people better. We could write our own stories, or read and talk about really insightful things that other people have written, filling our churches with those who are interested. But as heralds of God's Word, our goal is neither to entertain nor to intellectually stimulate. Rather we desire that people who are dead in their sins will find life; that people who are spiritually blind will see. And for that, only God's Word will do, as it is spoken to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Preacher, whose voice are your people hearing? Christian, whose voice are you listening to?

## GOD CREATES FOR HIS GLORY

There is one other theme in the story of creation we should notice, and that is that *God creates everything for his glory*. God didn't need to create anything. There is nothing necessary about this universe. But in love and grace, he chose to create everything so that his glory might be the joy and delight of others. As Revelation 4:11 declares, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and *by your will* they were created and have their being."

Anyone who's ever stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon, or witnessed a sunset over the Pacific, knows what it is to be moved by nature. But have you considered why nature moves us? The apostle Paul tells us in Romans 1 that creation is a display of God's majesty and power that is meant to be seen. The reason nature moves us is that it's an expression of God's glory. And we were created to respond to that glory.

But that's not all. In Genesis 1, we're told that the creation of human beings was different than the rest of creation. Unlike the animals, people were created to reflect the very character of God.

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Gen 1:26-27).

This is the pinnacle of God's creative work. So great is the glory of God that he created living creatures who would fill the earth, not just with life or intelligence or creativity, but with the reflection of God himself.

This is why the six days of creation end with a seventh day on which God rests. He's not tired. Rather, his work is complete. The seventh day is a coronation day, a day of worship, in which God sits down on his throne and receives back to himself his own glory, manifest and displayed through the work of his hands, and especially through the image of himself in mankind. Notice, too, that unlike all the other days, this day of worship never ends.

Does it offend you that we and all the rest of creation exist for God's glory? It certainly runs counter to everything inside us. What we need to understand is that this means that the story of creation is fundamentally a love story. God didn't have to create us, but he did. He didn't have to create us as bearers of his image, but he did. In doing so, he gave us a unique ability—the ability to take joy in the highest, most beautiful, most desirable thing imaginable, the glory of God. God himself loves nothing more than his own glory. There is nothing better or higher to love. There is nothing more beautiful to fall in love with. Out of that same love, he created you and me to participate in his glory as image bearers. The

result is that our story is swept up into the greatest story that will ever be known, the story of the unending and unsurpassed glory of God.

Many people spend a lot of energy and emotional anguish trying to figure out what their purpose in life is. The story of creation gives us the answer: our purpose is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." This purpose is in our very nature, hard-wired into our genes, stamped on our souls as image-bearers. Is it any wonder then that a life lived with other purposes in view will eventually feel like death? Far from constraining our freedom or limiting our joy, a life lived for the glory of God is the only true life there is. What's more, it is God's glory, rather than our inherent worth, that guarantees God's interest in his creatures. Do you want to know whether or not God cares what happens to you, to your family, to your church? Consider why he made you—for his glory. With so much at stake, with so much invested, how could God not be concerned?

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## The Problem of Creation (Part 4)

Every good narrative has tension—a problem that must be resolved. Do you know why? I think it's because *the Story*, God's Story of Creation, has a problem in it, a tension that needs to be resolved. The problem is not with God or his work in creation. The problem is you and me and our sinful rebellion against the God who made us.

Genesis 3 introduces this problem to the plot. The rest of the Bible traces out its development. Over and over again God is merciful toward the people he's created, and over and over again, they respond with rebellion. It's not just the story of the Bible; it's the story of our lives.

### CREATION FRUSTRATED IN ITS PURPOSE

If we're to understand the story of creation, we need to understand the effect our rebellion has had upon it. To begin with, *because of sin, creation is frustrated in its purpose* to display God's glory.

Paul puts it this way in Romans 8: "The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it."

Who subjected creation? God did. In response to Adam and Eve's sin, creation would no longer be the pure stage of God's glory. Instead, creation would be both the context of our judgment and at times an agent of God's wrath against us. Far from being an ever-expanding garden of Eden, the world became a place of weeds and thorns, toil and frustration. As God said to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you." And let's make no mistake; it became a hate-hate relationship.

On the one hand, designed for our joyful and abundant provision, creation now yields its treasures stubbornly and meagerly. On the other hand, created to cultivate and guard creation, we now spend our energies exploiting it and are complicit in its degradation and destruction. While God's power is still displayed in nature, nature itself is oft encountered as a natural disaster or in unforgiving indifference, leaving countless millions struggling to scratch out a living in their own inhospitable corner of the planet. Though there are some concerned to steward creation, too often that stewardship is motivated not by the worship of God, but the worship of nature.

What all of this tells us is that, despite all the good and right efforts of science and politics to ameliorate human suffering, despite all the good and right efforts of industry to develop and utilize resources, until God removes his curse, there will be no heaven on earth.

### CREATION SUBJECTED TO DEATH

But God's curse on creation goes beyond frustrating its purpose. *Because of sin, creation has also been subjected to death.*

Nowhere does the Bible suggest that God created all life to be immortal. In fact, the presumption of Genesis 1 and 2 is that he did not. However, the Bible does clearly suggest that God created human beings to live forever. It also clearly says that death entered in later as judgment for our sin. God warned Adam that if he disobeyed, "he would surely die."

And that is precisely the sentence God passed: "For dust you are, and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19). Paul put it this way: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin...in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Rom 5:12).

Pursuing our own glory rather than God's, what we received was the ignominy of a hole in the ground.

This world is not the way it's supposed to be. God created it to be a place of joy; we know it to be a source of constant frustration. God created it to be a habitat of life; we know it to be a crucible of death. God created it to be our home; we know it to be our graveyard.

We are dead spiritually, and we're going to die physically. There's nothing we can do to change that. And we have no one to blame but ourselves.

## THE CREATOR DIES

End of story? Not quite. If that were it, then, as Peggy Lee used to sing, we might as well break out the booze and have a ball. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. But there is one other effect the problem of sin has had on creation. *Because of sin, the creator died.*

Every great story has an amazing, unexpected twist in the plot that no one was looking for. Again, that's because *the Story* did it first. Against all hope and defying all expectations, Jesus, the creator of the universe, took on human flesh, lived a human life without sin, and then died on a Roman cross.

Why did he do it? He did it to demonstrate his love for sinners like you and me, to pay a debt that he did not owe and that we could never repay. After all, how can any of us ever make amends for our rebellion against an infinitely holy, infinitely good God? We don't have a good excuse, and we can't undo what we've already done. So, in love, Jesus the creator assumed my nature and my guilt, and he paid the debt for his people.

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

In Colossians 1, right after proclaiming Christ as the supreme creator of everything, Paul explains why the Son of God became a man.

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation, if you continue in your faith (Col 1:19-23).

The good news of the gospel is that the one who *made* us, who is justly angry *at* us, has also demonstrated his love *for* us. On the cross, the creator of life, the One who has life in and of himself, laid his life down so that sinners like us might find life once again, as we repent of our sin and trust in Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection.

This is the amazing, unexpected twist in the story. You and I couldn't have invented it if we tried. But we can trust in him, and once again be caught up in God's love story of creation.

## The Destiny of Creation (Part 5)

Many today consider creation and history to be nothing more than a random walk through time—in Shakespeare's famous phrase, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Others see a struggle for survival, reproduction, and evolutionary advance. Still others, influenced by Eastern religions, see a cycle, the *Lion King's* Circle of Life, endlessly repeating itself and finding meaning only in the repetition.

But the Bible's story of creation is different. God's story is not a cycle, it is not random, and it is not evolutionary. Rather, it is gracious. God's story has a destiny, a goal, precisely because it began with a purpose—the display of the glory of God. And despite our sin, God has been leading creation through history's long march to the destiny he has prepared for it. That destiny has everything to do with Christ: the heir of creation and the one by whom and for whom all things were made.

### NEW CREATURES

To begin with, it's *through Christ that we are made new creatures*.

God never abandoned his original plan. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea, and that will happen as the earth is filled with image bearers who truly and accurately reflect God's glory. Only now, because of our sin, we need to be re-created in order to fulfill God's plan.

Though Abraham's family was set apart for God on the outside, inside their hearts were—and our hearts are—corrupt and deadened by sin. They continually broke God's covenant and blended in with the world, just as we would still do had God left us in our natural state apart from Christ.

The history of Israel, just like our own personal history, points to our need to have stubborn, sinful hearts replaced by hearts soft to God's word and God's love.

This is what Jeremiah promised the Messiah would do in Jeremiah 31, and it's what Jesus Christ has in fact accomplished. Through his word, the gospel, Jesus resurrects dead sinners in newness of life and makes them new creatures. So Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). Elsewhere, he puts it this way:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:4-10).

God's grace to us in Christ does not come to us because we've decided we need new hearts and ask for them, any more than Adam asked to be created, or Abraham asked to be called by God. Grace comes to us through Christ because God loves us. Irresistibly, like a lover wooing his beloved, God changes our hearts, regenerating them, recreating our very nature; so that now, instead of hating God and running from him, we love him and turn to him in faith and repentance. As John said, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Through Christ, we who have put our faith in him have become new creatures.

### THE DISPLAY OF GOD'S GLORY

But not only through Christ and his grace are we new creatures. *In Christ, we are once again the display of God's glory.*

We display God's glory as we reflect his character as new creatures. Paul tells us that we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. When we demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit rather than the fruit of the sinful nature, when we love our enemies, when we forgive just as God forgave us, we display the glory of God. These good works don't save us. Rather they demonstrate our salvation; they display that we have been made new. If we don't see the glory of God in the transformed lives of our church members, then we have some hard questions to ask about our ministry as pastors and leaders. Gospel ministry results in lives that display God's glory.

But it's not just our changed lives that display this glory. In our union with Christ by faith, we are reconciled and joined to the One who is "the image of the invisible God," "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). We become his body, the church. And though we come from every tribe and language, every color and race, we are united in him as a single people of God, a single race, a single nation. The confusion and curse of Genesis 11 are removed in Christ.

In Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others (Rom 12:5).

Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:6).

In Christ, the church displays God's glory, as the divisions of this world count for nothing, and all that counts is a new creation (Gal 6:15). This is why we should want our churches to be as ethnically diverse as our communities. We want our churches to be places where we don't need anything other than Christ in common in order to love one another. We don't need to have the same jobs. We don't need to have the same backgrounds. We don't need to have the same educational attainments. We don't need to have the same skin color. We don't need to have the same taste in music. All we need is the new creation. All we need in common is Christ. That's not a political goal; it's a gospel goal and a New Creation reality.

## CREATION'S GOAL

But even that does not exhaust the destiny of creation. For together *with Christ, we are creation's goal.*

The church is more than Christ's body. Together with believers from every age since the beginning of the world, we are also Christ's bride. It's not by accident that the last image of an unfallen world in Genesis 2 presents the intimacy of a husband and wife on their wedding day. I think we were given that last snapshot of an unfallen world, because that is the picture of creation's end. God has been leading creation toward a wedding all along. In Revelation 21, the apostle of love writes,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.... He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Creation's destiny is a wedding day.

The story of creation really is a love story, the story of a bridegroom who will stop at nothing, not even the cost of his own life, to win for himself a bride, and to present her to himself radiantly beautiful, spotless, and pure. The story ends with the bridegroom preparing a new home for the new couple—a new heaven and a new earth. Unlike Adam with his bride, this bridegroom promises that he will exclude everything from that new home that might spoil or detract from their love.

In that place, there will be no more crying or pain, because there will be no more sin and evil. Only love will be there, as Christ and his bride display the glory of God's redeeming grace, and the angels watch in awe.

We're not there yet. But we will be. Are you living for that day? Will your story be included in that story? It can be. God's grace is sufficient and the call of his love is irresistible. Pray that you will have ears to hear God's voice of love in Christ. Pastor, pray that your people will have such ears. Do not rest content until you are sure that the only voice they hear from your pulpit is that singular voice, the matchless voice of love.

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## Preaching and Biblical Theology 101 (PBT-101)

By **Thomas Schreiner**

- Diagnosis—The Problem with Much Preaching Today (Part 1)
- Discovery—What is Biblical Theology (Part 2)
- Direction—How To Do Biblical Theology When Preaching (Part 3)

### Diagnosis—The Problem with Much Preaching Today (Part 1)

Within the association of churches to which I belong—the Southern Baptist Convention—the battle for the inerrancy of scripture may have been won. Yet neither we nor other evangelical denominations or churches who have won similar battles should congratulate ourselves too quickly. For conservative churches may embrace the inerrancy of scripture, but still deny in practice *the sufficiency* of God's word. We may say that scripture is God's inerrant word, yet still fail to proclaim it seriously from our pulpits.

There is in fact a famine for the word of God in many evangelical churches today. Sermon series feature in their titles television shows like *Gilligan's Island*, *Bonanza*, and *Mary Tyler Moore*. Preaching often concentrates on steps to a successful marriage or how to raise children in our culture. Sermons on family issues, of course, are fitting and needed, but two problems often surface. First, what the scriptures actually say about these subjects is often neglected. How many sermons on marriage faithfully and urgently set forth what Paul actually says about the roles of men and women (Eph 5:22-33)? Or are we embarrassed by what the scriptures say?

Second, and perhaps more seriously, such sermons are almost always preached on the horizontal level. They become the congregation's staple week-in and week-out, and the theological worldview that permeates God's word and that provides the foundation for all of life is passed over in silence. Our pastors turn into moralists like Dear Abby, giving advice on how to live a happy life week after week.

Many congregations do not realize what's happening because the moral life that such preaching commends accords, at least in part, with scripture. It speaks to the felt needs of both believers and unbelievers.

Pastors also believe they must fill their sermons with stories and illustrations, so that the anecdotes flesh out the moral point enunciated. Every good preacher will use illustrations. But sermons can become so chock-full of stories that they are bereft of any theology.

I have heard evangelicals say rather frequently that evangelical churches are doing fine in theology because congregations are not complaining about what we teach them. Such a comment is quite frightening. We as pastors have the responsibility to proclaim "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). We cannot rely on congregational polling to determine whether we are fulfilling our calling. We must rely on what the scriptures demand. It may be the case that a congregation has never been seriously taught God's word, so that they are unaware of where we as pastors are failing.

Paul warns us that "fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29). And elsewhere he says that "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (2 Tim 4:3-4). If we assess our preaching by what congregations desire, we may be cooking a recipe for heresy. I am not saying that our congregations are heretical, only that God's word rather than popular opinion must be the test of faithfulness. It is the calling of pastors to feed the flock with God's word, not to please people with what they desire to hear.

Too often our congregations are poorly trained by those of us who preach. Consider what happens when we feed a congregation with a steady diet of moralistic preaching. They may learn to be kind, forgiving, loving, and a good husband or wife (all good things of course!). Their hearts may be warmed and even edified. But as long as the theological foundation is neglected, the wolf of heresy lurks ever more closely. How? Not because the pastor himself is heretical. He may be fully orthodox and faithful in his own theology. Yet he *assumes* theology in all his preaching, and so neglects to preach to his people the storyline and theology of the Bible. In the next generation or two, therefore, the congregation may inadvertently and unknowingly call a more liberal pastor. This new pastor will also preach that people should be good, kind, and loving. He will also emphasize the importance of good marriages and dynamic relationships. The people in the pew may not even discern the difference, since the theology sounds just like the theology of the conservative pastor who preceded him. And in a sense, it is, for the conservative pastor never proclaimed or preached his theology. The conservative pastor believed in the inerrancy of scripture but not its sufficiency, for he did not proclaim all that the scriptures teach to his congregation.

Our ignorance of biblical theology surfaces constantly. Two occasions in the last ten years (one in a large stadium by a speaker whose name I cannot recall) in which a speaker invited people to come forward stick out in my mind. The sermon in the stadium was intended to be an evangelistic sermon, but I can honestly say that the gospel was not proclaimed at all. Nothing was said about Christ crucified and risen, or *why* he was crucified and risen. Nothing was said about why faith saves instead of works. Thousands came forward, and were no doubt duly recorded as saved. But I scratched my head and wondered what was really happening. I prayed that at least some would be truly converted, perhaps because they already knew the content of the gospel from hearing it on other occasions. The same was true in a church service where I visited. The preacher extended a stirring invitation to "come forward" and "be saved," but he gave no explanation of the gospel!

Such preaching may fill up our churches with unconverted people, who are doubly dangerous: they have been assured by pastors that they are converted and can never lose their salvation, but they are still lost. Then from that day forward, these same people are exhorted week after week with our new gospel for these postmodern times: be nice.

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## **Discovery—What is Biblical Theology (Part 2)**

The solution to the problems of shallow preaching described in part 1 is really quite simple: pastors must learn how to use biblical theology in their preaching. Yet learning how to do that requires us to begin by asking, what is biblical theology?

### **Biblical vs. Systematic Theology**

Biblical theology, in contrast to systematic theology, focuses on the biblical storyline. Systematic theology, though it is informed by biblical theology, is atemporal. Don Carson argues that biblical theology

stands closer to the text than systematic theology, aims to achieve genuine sensitivity with respect to the distinctiveness of each corpus, and seeks to connect the diverse corpora using their own categories. Ideally, therefore, biblical theology stands as a kind of bridge discipline between responsible exegesis and responsible systematic theology (even though each of these inevitably influences the other two).<sup>[1]</sup>

In other words, biblical theology restricts itself more consciously to the message of the text or corpus under consideration. It asks what themes are central to the biblical writers in their historical context, and attempts to discern the coherence of such themes. Biblical theology focuses on the storyline of scripture—the unfolding of God's plan in redemptive history. As we will consider more carefully in part 3, this means that we should interpret and then preach every text in the context of its relationship to the whole storyline of the Bible.

Systematic theology, on the other hand, poses questions to the text that reflect the questions or philosophical concerns of the day. Systematicians can also—to good end—explore themes that are implicit in biblical writings but do not receive sustained attention in the biblical text. Still, it should be apparent that any systematic theology worthy of the name builds upon biblical theology.

The distinctive accent of biblical theology, as Brian Rosner notes, is that it "lets the biblical text set the agenda."<sup>[2]</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer articulates the specific role of biblical theology in saying, "Biblical theology" is the name of an interpretive approach to the Bible which assumes that the word of God is textually mediated through the diverse literary, and historically conditioned, words of human beings."<sup>[3]</sup> Or, "To state the claim more positively, biblical theology corresponds to the interests of the texts themselves."<sup>[4]</sup>

Carson expresses well the contribution of biblical theology:

But ideally, biblical theology, as its name implies, even as it works inductively from the diverse texts of the Bible, seeks to uncover and articulate the unity of *all* the biblical texts taken together, resorting primarily to the categories of those texts themselves. In this sense it is canonical biblical theology, 'whole-Bible' biblical theology.<sup>[5]</sup>

Biblical theology may limit itself to the theology of Genesis, the Pentateuch, Matthew, Romans, or even all of Paul. And yet biblical theology may also comprehend the entire canon of scripture, in which the storyline of the scriptures as a whole is integrated. Too often expositional preachers limit themselves to Leviticus, Matthew, or Revelation without considering the place they inhabit in the storyline of redemptive history. They isolate one part of the scripture from another, and hence preach in a truncated way instead of proclaiming the whole counsel of God. Gerhard Hasel rightly remarks that we need to do biblical theology in a way "that seeks to do justice to all dimensions of reality to which the biblical texts testify."<sup>[6]</sup> Doing such theology is not merely the task for seminary professors; *it is the responsibility of every preacher of the word!*

We think again about the differences between systematic and biblical theology, for which Carson charts the way.<sup>[7]</sup> Systematic theology considers the contribution of historical theology, and hence mines the work of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, and countless others in formulating the teaching of scripture. Systematic theology attempts to speak forth the word of God directly to our cultural setting and our day. Obviously, then, any good preacher must be rooted in systematics to speak a profound and powerful word to his contemporaries.

Biblical theology is more inductive and foundational. Carson rightly says that biblical theology is a "mediating discipline," whereas systematic theology is a "culminating discipline." We can say, then, that biblical theology is intermediate, functioning as a bridge between the historical and literary study of scripture and dogmatic theology.

Biblical theology, then, works from the text in its historical context. That's not to say that biblical theology is a purely neutral or objective enterprise. The notion that we can neatly separate what it meant from what it means, as Krister Stendahl claimed, is a chimera. Scobie says the following about biblical theology:

Its presuppositions, based on a Christian faith commitment, include belief that the Bible conveys a divine revelation, that the Word of God in Scripture constitutes the norm of Christian faith and life, and that all the varied material in both Old and New Testaments can in some way be related to the plan and purpose of the one God of the whole Bible. Such a Biblical Theology stands somewhere between what the Bible 'meant' and what it 'means'.<sup>[8]</sup>

It follows, then, that biblical theology is not confined to only the New Testament or the Old Testament, but that it considers both Testaments together as the word of God. Indeed, biblical theology works from the notion that the canon of scripture functions as its norm, and thus both Testaments are needed to unpack the theology of scripture.

## BALANCING THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT

There is a wonderful dialectic between the Old Testament and the New Testament in doing biblical theology. The New Testament represents the culmination of the history of redemption begun in the Old Testament, and hence biblical theology is by definition a narrative theology. It captures the story of God's saving work in history. The historical unfolding of what God has done may be described as salvation history or redemptive history.

It is also fruitful to consider the scriptures from the standpoint of promise and fulfillment: what is promised in the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New Testament. We must beware of erasing the historical particularity of Old Testament revelation, so that we expunge the historical context in which it was birthed. On the other hand, we must acknowledge the progress of revelation from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Such progress of revelation recognizes the preliminary nature of the Old Testament and the definitive word that comes in the New Testament. To say that the Old Testament is preliminary does not cancel out its crucial role, for we can only understand the New Testament when we have also grasped the meaning of the Old Testament, and vice-versa.

Some are hesitant to embrace typology, but such an approach is fundamental to biblical theology, since it is a category employed by the biblical writers themselves. What is typology? Typology is the divinely intended correspondences between events, persons, and institutions in the Old Testament and their fulfillment in Christ in the New,[9] as when Matthew refers in his Gospel to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus' return from Egypt in the language of the Israel's departure from Egypt (Matt. 2:15; Ex. 4:22, 23; Hos. 11:1). Of course, not only do the New Testament authors observe these "divinely-intended correspondences." The Old Testament authors do as well. For instance, both Isaiah and Hosea predict a new exodus that will be patterned after the first exodus. In the same way, the Old Testament expects a new David who will be even greater than the first David. We see in the Old Testament itself, then, an escalation in typology, so that the fulfillment of the type is always greater than the type itself. Jesus is not only a new David, but the greater David.

Typology acknowledges a divine pattern and purpose in history. God is the final author of scripture—the story is a divine drama. And God knows the end from the beginning, so that we as readers can see adumbrations of the final fulfillment in the Old Testament.

1. D. A. Carson, "Systematic and Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 94. Another definition is set forth by Charles H. H. Scobie, "Biblical Theology may be defined as the ordered study of the understanding of the revelation of God contained in the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments" ("The Challenge of Biblical Theology," *Tyndale Bulletin* 42 [1991]: 36).
  2. Brian S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 5.
  3. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 56.
  4. *Ibid.*, 56.
  5. Carson, "Systematic and Biblical Theology," 100.
  6. Gerhard Hasel, "Biblical Theology: Then, Now, and Tomorrow," *Horizons of Biblical Theology* 4 (1982): 66.
  7. For the following discussion, see Carson, "Systematic and Biblical Theology," 101-02.
  8. Scobie, "The Challenge of Biblical Theology," 50-51.
  9. For a fuller introduction to typology, see David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible* (IVP, 1976), chapter 7.
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## Direction—How To Do Biblical Theology When Preaching (Part 3 )

When preaching the scriptures, it is vital to grasp where the book we are studying falls on the redemptive historical time line. At the risk of oversimplifying, doing good biblical theology while preaching consists of two basic steps: look backward and then look at the whole.

## LOOK BACKWARD—ANTECEDENT THEOLOGY

Walter Kaiser reminds us that we should consider the antecedent theology of each book as we preach the scriptures.[1]

For instance, when we preach the book of Exodus, we will scarcely interpret the message of Exodus rightly if we read it apart from its preceding context. And the preceding context for Exodus is the message conveyed in Genesis. We learn in Genesis that God is the creator of all things, and that he made human beings in his image, so that human beings would extend the Lord's rule over the entire world. Adam and Eve, however, failed to trust God and to obey the divine mandate. Creation was followed by the Fall, which introduced death and misery into the world. Nonetheless, the Lord promised that final victory would come through the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15). Intense conflict would ensue between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. But the former would prevail. We see in the rest of Genesis the battle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, and we learn that the seed of the serpent is remarkably powerful: Cain slays Abel; the wicked overwhelm the righteous until only Noah and his family remain; human beings conspire to make a name for themselves in building the tower of Babel. Still, the Lord remains sovereign. He judges Cain. He destroys all but Noah and his family in the flood. And he frustrates the designs of human beings at Babel.

The Lord makes a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, pledging that the victory promised in Gen 3:15 will come through their seed. The Lord will grant to them seed, land, and universal blessing. Genesis especially focuses on the promise regarding seed. In other words, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob don't possess the land of promise, nor do they bless the entire world during their generation. But Genesis concludes with the account of the twelve children the Lord granted Jacob.

So how is it that this "antecedent theology" of Genesis is crucial for reading the book of Exodus? It's foundational, because when Exodus opens with Israel multiplying exceedingly, we immediately recognize that the Abrahamic promise of many descendants from Genesis is being fulfilled. Not only that, thinking back to Genesis 3, we realize that Pharaoh is an offspring of the serpent, while Israel represents the seed of the woman. Pharaoh's attempt to kill all the male infants represents the designs of the seed of the serpent, as the battle between the seeds, which Genesis forecasted, continues.

As we continue to move through Exodus and the rest of the Pentateuch, we can see that the liberation of Israel from Egypt and the promise that they will conquer Canaan also represents a fulfillment of the Lord's covenant with Abraham. The promise of land is now beginning to be fulfilled. Furthermore, Israel now functions, in a way, as a new Adam in a new land. Like Adam they are to live in faith and obedience in the space that the Lord has given them.

If we were to read Exodus without being informed by the antecedent message of Genesis, we would not perceive the significance of the story. We would read the text apart from its context, and fall prey to an arbitrary reading.

The importance of antecedent theology is evident throughout the canon, and we must content ourselves with a few other examples here. For instance:

- The conquest under Joshua must be interpreted in light of the covenant with Abraham, so that the possession of Canaan is understood as the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that he would enjoy the land of Canaan.
- On the other hand, the exile of both the northern (722 B.C.) and southern kingdoms (586 B.C.) threatened in the prophets and recorded in several books represents the fulfillment of the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27-28. If preachers and congregations do not know the antecedent theology of the Mosaic covenant and the curses threatened in that covenant, they will scarcely be able to discern the import of both Israel and Judah being sent into exile.
- The promise of the new David (texts) reflects the covenant previously made with David that his dynasty would last forever.

- The Day of the Lord, which is so prominent in the prophets, must be interpreted in light of the promise made to Abraham.

And the same is true in the NT of course.

- We can scarcely understand the importance of the kingdom of God in the synoptics if we do not know the story line of the Old Testament, and are ignorant of God's covenants and promises to Israel.
- The significance of Jesus being the Messiah, the Son of Man, and the Son of God is all rooted in previous revelation.
- The book of Acts, as Luke indicates in his introduction, is a continuation of what Jesus began to do and teach, and hence it is informed both by the Old Testament and the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
- The epistles are also grounded in the great saving work accomplished by Jesus Christ, and explicate and apply the saving message and the fulfillment of God's promises to established churches.
- Finally, Revelation makes sense as the culmination of the story. It is not just a bit added at the end to provide some end-time excitement. The many allusions to the Old Testament demonstrate that Revelation is sketched against the backdrop of Old Testament revelation. Nor does the book make any sense unless one sees that it stands as the completion of all that Jesus Christ taught and did.

This is not to say that the storyline of redemption has the same centrality in all the books of the canon. We might think of wisdom books like Song of Solomon, Job, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Psalms. Yet even in these instances, the biblical authors presuppose the foundational truths of creation and fall from Genesis, as well as Israel's special role as God's covenant people. Sometimes they even articulate this role, as when the Psalms relate the story of Israel. Still, we are reminded of the diversity of the canon, and recognize that not every piece of literature has the same function.

The main truth for preachers here is that they must preach in such a way that they integrate their sermons into the larger biblical story of redemptive history. Those in the pews need to see the big picture of what God has been doing, and how each part of scripture contributes to that picture. Which brings us to...

## **LOOK AT THE WHOLE—CANONICAL PREACHING**

As preachers, we must not restrict ourselves only to antecedent theology. We must also consider the whole of scripture, the canonical witness that we now have in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we only preach antecedent theology, we will not accurately divide the word of truth; nor will we bring the Lord's message to the people of our day.

When we preach the first chapters of Genesis, then, we must also proclaim that the seed of the woman is Jesus Christ, and that the fall of creation into futility will be reversed through the work of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:18-25). Our hearers must see that the old creation is not the last word, but that there is a new creation in Christ Jesus. We must show them from the book of Revelation that the end is better than the beginning, and that the blessings of the original creation will be super-sized (so to speak) in the new creation.

So too, what can we as preachers say when preaching from Leviticus if we do not preach Leviticus in light of the fulfillment that has come in Jesus Christ? Surely we must proclaim that the OT sacrifices have been fulfilled in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Further, the regulations regarding food laws and cleanliness must be interpreted canonically, so that we grasp that the Lord does not call upon us to follow the food laws or cleanliness regulations. These regulations point to something greater: to the holiness and new lives we are to live as believers (1 Cor 5:6-8; 1 Pet 1:15-16).

Nor is it the case, as the New Testament plainly teaches, that believers are still under the Mosaic law (Gal 3:15-4:7; 2 Cor 3:7-18). The old covenant was intended to be in force for a certain period of salvation history. Now that the fulfillment in Christ has dawned, we are no longer under the covenant the Lord instituted with Israel. Hence, it is a mistake to think that the laws binding on Israel as a nation should serve as the paradigm for nation states today—as promulgated by Theonomists in our day. We must recognize in our preaching the difference between Israel as the people of God and the church of Jesus Christ. Israel was God's theocratic people, representing both God's covenant people and a political entity. But the church of Jesus Christ is not a political entity with a charter of laws for nation states. The church is composed of people from every people, tongue, tribe, and nation. Failure to appreciate this difference between the old and new covenant could wreak havoc on our congregations.

If we don't understand the differences between the old covenant and new, we will have a difficult time, for instance, proclaiming the possession of the land in Joshua. Surely the promise for the church of Jesus Christ is not that we will possess the land of Canaan some day! Rather, upon reading the New Testament, we learn that the promise of the land is understood typologically and also escalated into a final fulfillment in the New Testament. Hebrews explains that the promise of rest given under Joshua was never intended to be the final rest for the people of God (Heb 3:7-4:13). Paul explains that the land promise for Abraham cannot be confined to Canaan but has been universalized to include the whole world (Rom 4:13). We discover in Hebrews that we as believers do not wait for an earthly city but a heavenly city (Heb 11:10, 14-16; 13:14), a city to come. Or, as John puts it in Revelation 21-22, we await the heavenly Jerusalem, which is nothing other than a new creation. In other words, if we preach from Joshua, and we do not emphasize our inheritance in Christ and the new creation, then we have failed miserably to communicate the storyline of scripture in expositing the book. We have truncated the message so that our people have failed to see how all of scripture is fulfilled in Christ, and how all the promises of God are "yes" and "amen" in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 1:20).

If we preach the scriptures canonically, using biblical theology, then we will proclaim Christ from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. We must avoid the danger, of course, of simplistic allegorizing or forced connections between the testaments. We will not fall prey to such errors if we have properly done the work of biblical theology and followed the hermeneutic of the apostolic writers themselves. The apostolic writers, after all, believed that the Old Testament itself pointed to Christ and was fulfilled in him. And they were taught their hermeneutic by Jesus Christ himself, just as he opened the scriptures to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). In this regard, some have claimed that the hermeneutic of the apostles was inspired but should not be imitated today.[2] Such a view is flawed because it suggests that the fulfillment the apostles saw in the Old Testament does not accord with what the texts truly mean. If this is the case, the connections drawn between the testaments are arbitrary, and the apostles (and Christ himself!) do not serve as models for interpreting the Old Testament today.

If we believe, however, that the apostles were inspired and wise readers of the Old Testament, then we have a pattern for reading all of the Old Testament in light of the fulfillment accomplished in Jesus Christ. The storyline and structures of the Old Testament all point towards him and are completed in him.[3] When we read about the promise of Abraham in the Old Testament, we realize that it is fulfilled in Christ Jesus. The shadows of Old Testament sacrifices find their substance in Christ. For instance:

- Feasts like Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles point to Christ as the Passover sacrifice, to the gift of the Spirit, and to Jesus as the Light of the world.
- Believers are no longer required to observe the Sabbath, for it's also one of the shadows of the old covenant (Col 2:16-17; cf. Rom 14:5) and belongs to the Sinai covenant that is no longer in force for believers (Gal 3:15-4:7; 2 Cor 3:4-18; Heb 7:11-10:18). The Sabbath looks forward to the rest that has begun for us now in Christ and that will be consummated in the heavenly rest in the last day (Heb 3:12-4:11).
- The temple anticipates Christ as the true temple, while circumcision finds its consummation in the circumcision of the heart anchored in the cross of Christ and secured by the work of the Spirit.
- David as the king of Israel and a man after God's own heart does not represent the apex of the kingship; David is a type of Jesus Christ. Christ, the greater David, was sinless. He is the messianic king who through his ministry, death, and resurrection has inaugurated the promises God has made to his people.

If we do not preach the Old Testament in terms of the whole canon, we will either restrict ourselves to moral lessons from the Old Testament, or, what is just as likely, we will rarely preach from the Old Testament. As Christians we know that much of the Old Testament no longer speaks directly to our situation today. For example, God has not promised to liberate us from political bondage as he freed Israel from Egypt. The land of Israel is politically volatile today, but Christians do not believe that their joy will come from living in Israel, nor do they think that worship consists in going to the temple to offer sacrifice. However, if we do not preach the Old Testament canonically, in light of biblical theology, it will too often be passed over in Christian preaching. In doing so, we not only rob ourselves of wonderful treasures from the word of God, but we also fail to see the depth and multifaceted character of biblical revelation. We put ourselves in a position where we do not read the Old Testament as Jesus and the apostles did, and hence we do not see that the God's promises are "yes" and "amen" in Jesus Christ.

Reading the Old Testament canonically does not mean that the Old Testament is not read in its historical cultural context. The first task of every interpreter is to read the Old Testament in its own right, discerning the meaning of the biblical author when it was written. Further, as we argued above, each OT book must be read in light of its antecedent theology, so that the storyline of scripture is grasped. But we also must read all of scripture canonically, so that the Old Testament is read in light of the whole story—the fulfillment that has come in Jesus Christ.

In short, we should always consider the perspective of the whole—of the divine author—in doing biblical theology and in preaching of God's word. We should read the scriptures both from front to back and back to front. We should always consider the developing story as well as the end of the story.

## CONCLUSION

Our task as preachers is to proclaim the whole counsel of God. We will not fulfill our calling if as preachers we fail to do biblical theology. We may get many compliments from our people for our moral lessons and our illustrations, but we are not faithfully serving our congregations if they do not understand how the whole of scripture points to Christ, and if they do not gain a better understanding from us of the storyline of the Bible. May God help us to be faithful teachers and preachers, so that every person under our charge will be presented perfect in Christ.

1. Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 134-40.
2. Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
3. For the importance of Christ-centeredness in our preaching, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003).

*This article has been excerpted and adapted from The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology 10.2 (2006) and is used with permission. Thomas Schreiner serves as the preaching pastor of Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He is also a professor of New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and has written Romans (Baker, 1998) and Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology (InterVarsity, 2001), among many other titles.*



## The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment

By **James M. Hamilton Jr.**

There are signs that the iron curtain between systematic and biblical theology might be rusting away. While systematic theologians have long asserted the centrality of God's glory, until recently the glory of God has not been seriously entertained as a possible "center" of biblical theology. I proposed the possibility that *the glory of God in salvation through judgment* is the center of biblical theology in a recent essay in *Tyndale Bulletin*. In this brief article, I want to skim across the canon to point out some of the biblical evidence for this proposal and then summarize some of the implications it has for Christian ministry.

### THE BIBLICAL CASE

There are many indications in the Old Testament that God is glorified in salvation that comes through judgment. Judgment highlights mercy, and God's holiness and compassion are put on display. For instance, when Moses asked to see God's glory, the Lord passed before him, proclaimed his own name—Yahweh—and announced that he is tender in mercy and exact in justice (Exod 33:18–34:7).

When the spies brought back their bad report, Israel sinned and incurred God's wrath. Moses interceded and called on God to show mercy because of his love for Israel and his reputation among the nations. God showed mercy, and he promised that his glory would fill the earth. The nation was not destroyed (evidence of God's mercy); but the generation fell in the wilderness (evidence of God's justice) (Num 14:11–21).

When Israel deserved to be exiled from the land, God mercifully restrained his wrath for the sake of his own glory (Isa 48:9–11). But eventually justice fell, and they were exiled.

We also find a plethora of evidence in the New Testament that God intends to make himself known as a God who is both merciful and just. When Jesus came in fulfillment of the promises, he went about casting out demons. As he did this, he was judging the forces of evil and saving the afflicted from the effects of the curse. All marveled and glorified God at his mighty deeds (Matt 9:8; 15:31).

Then the project failed, or so it would seem: Jesus was crucified. But in what the world understood as weakness, God displayed his power and raised Jesus from the dead (1 Cor 1:18–31). The forces of darkness are condemned by God's triumph over them in the weakness and folly of a crucified Messiah (Col 2:15). At the cross, Paul explains, God has made a way to show mercy *and* be just (Rom 3:24–26). At the cross, Jesus is glorified by his unique ability to satisfy the justice of the Father. The Father is glorified by the display of his absolute holiness, by his remarkable love for sinners in sending Jesus to die for them, and by the surprisingly wonderful plan of redemption. At the cross, Jesus and the Father are glorified, which seems to be what they wanted (John 12:28; 13:31–32; 17:1).

When Jesus comes again, the glory of God will be abundantly manifest as he saves those who believe and visits justice on the wicked (2 Thes 1:4–12). God will be glorified in salvation through judgment.

Moving to consider what happens when people come to faith in Christ, we recognize that those who are saved are first judged by God's holiness and feel their need for Jesus. Salvation comes through judgment. Those who suppress the righteousness of God and oppress the people of God will meet with judgment. When God vindicates his people he shows that none can thwart his power; none can stay his

hand. God is glorified as he saves his people through the judgment of his enemies, who are also the enemies of God's people (Rev 12:1–17).

All of this, and much more, leads me to the conclusion that the glory of God in salvation through judgment is the center of biblical theology. So what does this have to do with

Christian ministry? Is this relevant? Does it have any cash value?

## THE PAYOFF FOR MINISTRY

When the apostles spoke of their pastoral priorities, they said they were devoting themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). No doubt, then, the center of biblical theology should inform prayer and preaching. It should also inform two other aspects of ministry we see the apostles committed to in the New Testament: evangelism and church discipline.

### ***Prayer***

Do you pray for God to be glorified? This was the first petition Jesus taught his disciples: "Hallowed by thy name" (Matt 6:9).

Moses interceded for the people of Israel, as we have seen, by petitioning God according to God's concern for his own reputation among the Egyptians (Num 14:13–16, cf. also Exod 32:12; Deut 9:28).

David asked God to confirm his promises in 2 Samuel 7:8–16, so that God's name would be magnified forever (7:25–26).

Solomon called on God at the dedication of the temple to hear prayer so that "all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you" (1 Kgs 8:43).

Elijah called on God to consume the sacrifice on Mount Carmel "that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God" (1 Kgs 18:37).

Hezekiah asks for salvation "that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone" (2 Kgs 19:19).

And this pattern is not limited to the Old Testament: Paul prays for God to be glorified in the church and in Christ Jesus (Eph 3:14–21); the author of Hebrews prays that God will equip his audience with everything good for the glory of Christ (Heb 13:20–21); Peter blesses God for what he has done among the recipients of his first epistle (1 Pet 1:3, cf. 4:11; 2 Pet 3:18); and Jude's prayer for his audience builds to God's glory in Christ (Jude 24–25).

Let us pray with the saints of the Scriptures, therefore, who prayed for God to be glorified in all things. When we pray for God to be glorified, we are praying for what God wants, which will surely come to pass.

We should also pray for God to glorify himself in his justice and mercy. Do you pray for God to either save or bankrupt the owners of strip clubs? Do you pray for God to either save or stop those who would thwart the progress of the word? When we pray for God to display his justice and his mercy for the sake of his name, "we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him" (1 John 5:15).

### ***The Ministry of the Word***

If the glory of God in salvation through judgment is the center of biblical theology, we can exult as we exposit every verse of the Bible. We will never have to skip any of those verses that sound harsh to our ears—not even the ones in the imprecatory Psalms.

The most startling one of these may be Psalm 137:9: "Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones [O daughter of Babylon] and dashes them against the rock!" As harsh as it may sound to us, this prayer, like the ones above, is a prayer for God to be glorified. Here, justice is visited by the blessed one as he crushes the heads of the seed of the serpent (cf. Gen 3:15). The enemies of God's people get due justice, and it is fierce. Through the justice visited upon the enemies of God, God's people are delivered. Salvation comes through judgment for the glory of God.

God's judgment is awful, but he does not owe anyone a warning that it is coming. So the very existence of this imprecation shows God's mercy, as it announces that the seed of the woman is going to exact vengeance upon those who reject God and abuse his people. The words of Psalm 137:9 show the raging fury of God's wrath, and this is a kindness: it means to produce repentance. Believing that God will be glorified in salvation through judgment, and embracing this as the gravitational hub of the whole Bible, frees us to proclaim the whole counsel of God.

### ***Evangelism***

Do you tell people the truth when you share the gospel with them? Do you tell them that God's awful wrath is coming, but that God is mercifully giving them an opportunity to be cleared of all their guilt if they will trust Jesus? We must make clear that today is the day of salvation; now is the time of God's mercy. When the door of the ark closes, wrath remains for those who do not believe, and God will show his awful power on them.

There is not now and there never will be a conflict between God's love for humans and his condemnation of humans who do not believe in Jesus. Embracing the glory of God in salvation through judgment as the center of biblical theology will make us urgent evangelists, for now is the time of salvation!

### ***Church Discipline***

We are the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing (cf. 2 Cor 2:14–16). God will be glorified in both groups. To the redeemed, the aroma of Christ is the sweet fragrance of God's mercy. To the unbelieving, the aroma of Christ is the stench of hell. If we do not practice church discipline, the sweet aroma of God's mercy is mixed with the fumes of wrath, and that stench will not please God.

Believing that God gets glory from the display of both his justice and his mercy liberates us as churches to give people a foretaste—a warning—of the wrath to come. We want them to experience it now so that they don't have to go through it on the last day. God is glorified in salvation through judgment, and as imitators of God, we must strive to embody both God's justice and his mercy. The repentant are restored, experiencing the kindness of God. The unrepentant are warned of the wrath to come, and they are told in no uncertain terms that if they do not act like Christians they will not be treated like Christians. So we take them off the membership roll, deny them communion, and urge them to be born again and believe in Jesus.

## **CONCLUSION**

God's mercy and his justice redound to his praise, and mercy and justice balance one another. God is just, but his justice is not the mad rampage of a dictator. It is the perfect expression of righteousness that is not in conflict with love but expresses it. God is merciful, and he does not wink at sin. All that God does displays either justice or mercy, or both. Judgment is often clothed with mercy, and mercy comes through judgment. The more severe the judgment, the more astonishing the mercy, to the glory of the Father in Christ the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit, world without end, amen.

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# A Pastors' and Theologians' Forum on Biblical Theology

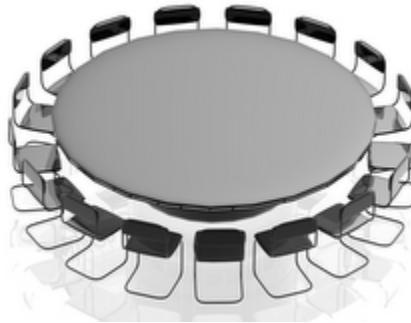
**"In what ways will a congregation's understanding of salvation and the gospel be limited if their pastors do not have a good grasp of biblical theology?"**

Answers from

- Andrew Davis
- Graeme Goldsworthy
- Phil Johnson
- Aaron Menikoff
- Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr.
- Stephen Wellum

With a special, extended response from

- Bruce Waltke



## Andrew Davis

Because it was to the glory of God to craft a plan of redemption before the creation of the world, and to rule over human history to achieve that plan, so the glory of preaching is bound up in declaring this plan as Scripture reveals it. That is the work of "biblical theology," a term that refers to the study of God's plan to redeem sinful humanity by the blood of Christ and to present to himself a perfect people at the end of time.



Pastors must have a firm grasp of biblical theology in order to make sense of the Bible's cohesive story and to communicate it clearly to their congregations. Without that grasp, the congregation's understanding of salvation may be limited to reforming their moral choices and improving their quality of life for now, all sweetened with a somewhat vague concept of heaven for later. Their understanding will fall far short of the grandeur of the true picture: the promise of a full salvation worked by Almighty God from all of sin's damage, resulting in a perfect relationship with God, with God's people from all eras and all nations, and with God's world.

Congregations naturally have a hard time tracing out this story of redemption through the books of the Bible and through the differing genres of Scripture. A topical approach to preaching, in which the pastor preaches on relevant topics like prayer, the family, or battling temptation, can further their confusion, as the hearers cannot see the forest for the trees. Even a careful biblical expositor who does not set his expositions in the context of redemption history can get so immersed in the glorious details of the passage that his congregation will lose sight of the forest. What do I mean by the forest?

Charles Spurgeon told his students a story urging them to preach redemptive history's goal—Christ—from each passage: "From every town, village, and little hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London... and so from every text in Scripture there is a road to the metropolis of the Scriptures, that is Christ. Your business is, when you get to a text, to say, 'Now, what is the road to Christ?' and then preach a sermon, running along the road towards the great metropolis—Christ." The glory of God's sovereign control over history is that he is the one who laid those roads to Christ. The glory of preaching is to find them.

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## Graeme Goldsworthy

If a pastor does not understand or teach biblical theology, the members of the congregation are likely to suffer thus:



1. Congregations will not understand the unity of the Bible or the progressive nature of revelation. They will fall prey to those proclaiming the disunity of the biblical message; and a fragmented Bible cannot be recognized as the inspired word of God.
2. Congregations will not understand the centrality of Christ for interpreting Scripture and the meaning of life in our world. Recourse to people and events—particularly those of the Old Testament—will be valued mainly for their exemplary lessons, and not for their typological contribution to understanding the person and work of Christ. They will not see that Christ in his gospel is the interpreting principle for scripture and, indeed, for all reality.
3. Grace will be eroded by legalism. Preaching that principally points to the examples of Bible characters leads almost inevitably to legalism since the connection with the gospel of grace will be clouded or even completely lost.
4. The application of Bible texts will often be short-circuited. The Bible is reduced to a lucky-dip of texts all of which are perceived as standing in the same essential relationship to the Christian believer, and the progressive nature of biblical revelation in salvation-history is ignored.
5. The presuppositions of the New Testament in portraying Christ as the fulfiller of the Old Testament will be overlooked so that the fullness of Christ's person and work is undermined. Teaching from the Old Testament is particularly at risk.
6. The doctrinal formulations of the church will be seen as less important in that their relationship to the progressive revelation of the Bible will not be evident. Biblical theology and doctrine work together for a robust understanding of God and his purposes for his people and the world.

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## Phil Johnson



The answer to the forum question is clear from history, starting with the sad case of the Jewish leaders whom we meet in the gospels. Jesus frequently scolded them for missing the main point of the Scriptures. They misunderstood the messianic promise (John 6:15). They misconstrued the purpose of the law (Gal 3:21-25). They overlooked their own desperate need for true, justifying righteousness (Rom 10:1-4). They ignored the big-picture story of the Old Testament (John 5:37-47). And therefore they reduced the Scriptures to a manual for moralism, legalism, stark sacramentalism, and a hubristic kind of nationalism.

Jesus' answer, again and again, was to point out that *he* is the focus of all the Scriptures: "Search the Scriptures . . . these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39 nkjv). "If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me" (v. 46). "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (8:56). Even after the resurrection, the disciples did not seem to understand the full import of all this; so on the road to Emmaus, he gave them an extended overview of the whole sweep of biblical theology: "Beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27).

Since Christ is the focus of all the Scriptures, no preacher has fully expounded the meaning of any passage until he has shown its relationship to the rest of redemptive history and how it points to Christ.

Preaching that omits this vital dimension always breeds the same kind of dull-heartedness and spiritual decline Jesus encountered in Israel at his first advent. The church today is in the throes of a very similar spiritual miasma, because too many churchgoers have been fed for too long on a steady diet of topical messages, motivational talks, shallow, feel-good homilies, or even thinner gruel. The only remedy, and (I believe) the best recipe for revival in the church, is a powerful wave of biblical preaching and biblical theology in which we recognize and proclaim Christ as the center and focus of everything God's word has to say.

*Phil Johnson is the executive director of Grace For You.*

## Aaron Menikoff

Congregations starve without biblical theology. Pastors who fail to fold biblical theology into their preaching will see their congregation's understanding of salvation and the gospel whither in several ways. Here are a few.



*The congregation's understanding of salvation and the gospel will be shallow.* Pastors too often play one note when, as Mark Strom puts it, the entire Bible is a beautiful symphony. Salvation is more than being saved from debt, loneliness, or a bad marriage. The gospel is even more than the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Congregations should instead be told how every passage fits into the grand storyline of the Bible: creation, fall, redemption, new-creation. I don't know who said it first, but he or she was right: shallow preaching makes shallow Christians.

*The congregation's understanding of salvation and the gospel will be confused.* Today, messages that lack a biblical theological context—such as the ever popular "Jesus loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life"—will fall on deaf ears because this is the postmodern generation, a generation so self-referential that people come to church as islands without a mainland, cities without a map, souls without a context. They deny an overarching explanation for all of life exists—what philosophers call a "meta-narrative." To be told that Jesus has a "plan" sounds ridiculous to them because there is no plan! "What am I saved from?" they ask, "What am I saved into?" they wonder. Postmodern listeners need the gospel message explained within the framework of biblical theology. *The storyline of the Bible is the mainland, the map, the context. It is the overarching explanation for everyone's existence.* Postmodern ears and hearts may continue to suppress the truth. But in the midst of the shipwreck that is their lives, they will find it harder and harder to deny that the Bible presents a compelling story: creation, fall, redemption, new-creation, which is a rational, even persuasive meta-narrative worth considering.

*The congregation's understanding of salvation and the gospel will be man-centered.* What happens when congregations aren't exposed to the great storyline of Scripture? They see less of God, the Author of history, and more of themselves. They are humbled less by his enduring faithfulness. They turn the Bible into their advice column or quick reference guide. When Christ promises that the gates of hell will never prevail against the church they shrug their shoulders and say, "Oh." They don't fall to their knees and worship the promise-keeping Lord of the universe.

Pastors who grow in their knowledge of biblical theology, on the other hand, will make much of God and not man. And their congregations will be raised to have great thoughts of God.

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## **Raymond C. Ortlund Jr.**

Left to ourselves, we Christians tend to think piecemeal, as people generally do. More than we realize, we operate out of the vague impressions and half-truths swirling around in our thoughts. At the same time, the tsunami of one, all-encompassing, ungodly worldview is smashing into us, and we are overwhelmed by it. We want to be thoroughgoing Christians, but our patterns of life differ little from unbelievers. Why? Because a few biblical verses sprinkled on the surface of our confusion cannot lift us into Christian greatness. Only a worldview can answer another worldview.



God has called us to step by faith into the worldview that the Bible labors to communicate. To take that step, and to keep taking more steps in that direction, we need constant, Spirit-illuminated discoveries of the biblical drama in its fullness. We need to see each particular biblical truth in connection with the whole, centered not in the law but in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then the message of God becomes clear and compelling. Then the grandeur of it all begins to break upon our hearts. Then we can stand up to that tidal wave of God-denial that is always washing over us.

For example, why should we refuse the sexual recklessness to which we are daily exposed? The answer, "Because you'll be punished," is too small to motivate us. Here is the answer that biblical theology gives: "Because you're missing out on the ultimate love story."

God is our Lover. From the beginning, he has pursued our hearts. From the beginning, we have given our hearts to others. That's why every temptation is a solicitation to spiritual adultery. But Christ has come to win his bride. He died on the cross because of our flirtations. The way stands open for every spiritual whore to be joined as one with the Lord, to be presented to him in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, and to live happily ever after with him. Now, is the momentary pleasure of any sin worth snubbing *that* romance?

*Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. is the senior pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, and is the author of God's Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery (IVP, 1996).*

## **Stephen Wellum**

In order to answer this question, we must first understand what "biblical theology" is. In the simplest of terms, "biblical theology" is the discipline which seeks to read specific texts (i.e. exegesis) in light of the entire canonical context of Scripture.



Convinced that God's verbal revelation to us occurred progressively in the course of history and centers in our Lord Jesus Christ (see Heb 1:1-3); and convinced that Scripture is God's word and thus exhibits a unity amidst all its diversity, biblical theology seeks to examine the unfolding nature of God's redemptive plan culminating in Christ. As such, it provides the basis for understanding how texts in any portion of Scripture relate to the entire biblical teaching with the goal of learning better how (i) to read and apply Scripture, (ii) to proclaim "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), and (iii) to "think God's thoughts after him." In short, biblical theology brings us face to face with our glorious triune God as it teaches us how to be *biblical* in every area of our life.

Now given what biblical theology is, it should be quite evident that a pastor and congregation's lack of it will lead to spiritual impoverishment. We will not only fail to understand the "big picture" of Scripture and God's redemptive plan, we will undercut the glory of Christ and the centrality of the gospel. Too often we view Scripture as a series of unconnected pieces apart from an overall storyline and plan. Thus, when we seek to apply the Scripture to our lives (especially the Old Testament), we divorce the episodes of the Old Testament from their canonical context. As such, most of our teaching of the Old Testament is reduced to moralism, instead of driving our hearers back repeatedly to the wonder, glory, and power of the gospel. I am convinced that the less we preach, teach, and apply a "whole-Bible" viewpoint, the less we will think theologically in the church. Why? Because, in the end, to think theologically is to think canonically.

One of the pressing issues we face today in the evangelical church is a rising biblical illiteracy. Too often we do not know even the basic points of Scripture, let alone how whole books of Scripture contribute to the overall plan of God. But our calling as Jesus' disciples is to know God, enjoy him now and forevermore, and to make disciples of all nations. In our pulpits, in our Sunday school instruction, in our families, and in our evangelism, we must be "whole-Bible" people, committed to loving the Lord with all that we are. Given the pressures of living in a postmodern society, we need to learn afresh how to read and apply Scripture correctly as God's truth for the life and health of the church. This will only be done in a faithful manner when we take seriously the discipline of biblical theology.

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## Bruce Waltke

In this essay I suggest three reasons why pastors should teach biblical theology, not just dogmatic theology.



### **1. To Understand the Nature of God's Revelation**

There's an old French oxymoron: "The more things change, the more they remain the same." This is an appropriate aphorism for understanding God's revelation.

The Rainbow Bridge spanning Niagara Falls began as a kite. Those building the bridge flew a kite across the majestic waterway, until it came down on the other side of the gorge, linking the two sides with a thin string. Using the string, its builders pulled strings, then ropes, and eventually steel girders across the gorge. The more the bridge changed, the more it became what it was always meant to be.

The kite string represents, you might say, Genesis' description of salvation, while the rest of Scripture represents the developing bridge—first strings, then ropes, then steel girders. God's revelation unfolds before us in this progressive fashion. He does not change or disown his previous statements, but his progressive pronouncements resemble that of the bridge in its development.

This continuity and the transformations of key words, motifs, themes, and concepts wind their way through the Old Testament and reach fulfillment in Christ and the Church, and will find their consummation in the new heaven and the new earth. Observing and reflecting upon each stage of the construction causes admiration and understanding of the final form.

### **2. To Know Ourselves**

Our self-identity is the window through which we perceive and engage the world; it determines all that we do. Our identity, or our "inscape," to use the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins' term, determines our landscape. This identity or "inscape" is formed by two factors: memory and destiny. Without a memory, a person loses identity. Without a history to sustain it, a society and the world around it become virtually phantom realities. Our memories of the past inform who we are and shape our vision of our destinies; and that vision or hope moves us forward, forging our will and determination. If we were to suffer amnesia, and forget our homes and communities, we would confess that we are lost, uncertain of our identity. This is not only true for individuals, it is true communities. Our collective history shapes our thinking; our sense of destiny moves us to reach beyond ourselves, motivating us to desire and to strive. As John McKay, the onetime president of Princeton University noted, "The road to tomorrow leads through yesterday."

Aside from teaching us about God, sin, and the need for redemption, a significant portion of the Old Testament recounts the history of the people of God. These are the narratives that constitute the memories of the Christian community. These memories inform our identity as Christians. Thus, Abraham is our spiritual father. His story becomes part of our past. The exodus, the monarchy of Israel and Judah, and the exile cease to be ancient tales of a distant people, but the triumphs and tragedies of our own

history. Moreover, the Old Testament's ceremonial laws such as not eating "unclean" foods are "visual-aids" to instruct God's people of all ages to be pure.

Not surprisingly, a large part of spiritual strength, of being rooted and grounded in the faith, is knowing our history, knowing who we are. Moreover, the history of "our ancestors" is given to us as "examples" (1 Cor. 10:6). We do well to remember George Santayana's often repeated line—"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"—tweaked by Mark Twain as "history rhymes."

### **3. To Understand the New Testament**

By the time of Jesus, multiple text-communities existed across the biblical world whose identity and patterns of thought were shaped by the words of the Old Testament. The authors of the New Testament were members of such communities. Consequently, everything they portrayed about Jesus, they did using Old Testament texts, themes, motifs, and concepts, and using the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period. C.H. Dodd argued that the Old Testament formed the sub-structure of New Testament theology.[1]

The apostles reflected upon Jesus in Old Testament categories. He is the anointed one, the suffering servant, the new Adam, the new Israel, the son of man, the son of God, the word, the high priest, the paschal lamb, and the pioneer in inaugurating the hoped for kingdom of God.[2] Furthermore, the New Testament authors wrote this way to an audience similarly immersed in the words, themes, motifs, and theological categories of the Old Testament. They cited or alluded to the Old Testament more than two hundred and fifty times. D.A. Carson and H.G.M. Williamson, in the book they co-edited *It is Written: Scripture citing Scripture*, devote separate chapters by a number of authors to these citations in the diverse literature of the New Testament.[3]

Only those who have journeyed through the Old Testament can appreciate the full splendor and glory of the New Testament and fully digest its fruit. Those who have not cannot. The consequence of a general ignorance about the Old Testament among the people of God is a pervasive reduction of the full message of the New Testament to a basic gospel of atonement and individual ethics. I suspect many Christians feel spiritually undernourished because they live out their lives on the basis of about ten biblical texts. The spiritual life of the church would be greatly enriched by kindling a love of the Old Testament through a more thorough program of adult Christian education.

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1. C.H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1952).

2. "Kingdom of heaven" is Matthew's equivalent of "kingdom of God." The New Testament terms refer to Israel's God becoming king on earth, not a place called "heaven" where saved souls go to live after death. The Jews understood the terms to mean that the King would come to Zion, the Jews of the Diaspora would return from exile, and the King would exact justice, vindicate Israel, defeat the pagans, and bring peace and prosperity to the earth.

3. D.A. Carson and H.G.M Williamson, *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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## Biblical and Systematic Confusion Yields Gospel Delusions

By Jonathan Leeman

The difference between biblical theology and systematic theology is like difference between my wife recounting a conversation she had with someone and my recounting such a conversation.

When my wife gets off the telephone with her mother, for instance, she gives me the blow-by-blow: "Mom said...then I said...then mom said...then I said." She carefully recounts every interchange, and usually reenacts the full-range of emotions that transpired through the course of the conversation. Since I have not yet reached my glorified state, I'm often tempted to rush her to "get to the bottom line" or "land the plane." In her grace, she forgives me and presses on in ushering me through the full existential gamut of what she just experienced.

When I get off the phone with a friend, on the other hand, I like, quite simply, to sum up. "The conversation was good. We decided to..." The blow-by-blow feels inefficient. So I look over all the data and present her with a "bottom line" interpretation of that data.

Now my wife might say that my approach is less existential and more cerebral, at least she would if she was as pretentious as me and used words like existential. Gratefully, she's not. I on the other hand would say that that interpretive, cerebral element indicates the work of synthesis and analysis upon which judgments are reached and decisions are made.

Wonderfully, Paul assures us in 1 Corinthians 12 that the body of Christ is served by both people like me and people like my wife.

It's also served by both biblical and systematic theology. The analogy doesn't work perfectly, but biblical theology sounds more like my wife sounds. It provides us with something like the blow-by-blow of narrative development through the course of redemption history. The chronology of the story is significant, as one thing portends, or leads to, another. Yes, a degree of interpreting and systematizing occurs in biblical theology, but, at least compared to systematic theology, the goal of biblical theology generally is not to interpret the data, but to describe it. It's to show how all the data *is* in fact a story that hangs together: "the promise of the seed, you see, leads to the covenant with Abraham, which in turn leads to..."

Systematic theology sounds more like I sound. It presents us with a summing up—a succinct, comparatively cerebral interpretation that allows for judgments to be reached and actions to be taken. It's no knock on systematic to call it cerebral, because the goal of the synthesis and analysis is living, believing, trusting, and action. That's why John Frame refers to systematic theology as "application." He says, "It is precisely when we do systematic theology that the specific question of application is *explicitly* raised."<sup>[1]</sup> Systematic must be sensitive to the philosophical categories of particular time and place—as Tom Schreiner mentions in [his article](#)—because it's people in a particular time and place that systematic theology means to stimulate to action.

Clearly, both biblical and systematic theology, when done rightly, serve good and complementary purposes. In D. A. Carson's language, one mediates, the other culminates. And the church needs both.

Yet it's important, even critical, for us not to confuse the two—and the role each of them plays—particularly when it comes to defining the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## CATEGORY CONFUSION

One of the more common mistakes in defining the "gospel" these days, as I perceive it, is to confuse biblical and systematic categories. A biblical theological presentation of the good news follows the lines of redemption-history: creation, fall, redemption, new creation. Notice the elements of narrative and chronology in this presentation. That's what I'm likening (an imperfect analogy) to my wife's blow-by-blow description of a phone conversation.

A systematic theological presentation of the gospel takes much of the same data of this storyline and renders a "bottom line" in several areas of prominent concern, kind of like my own approach to relating the contents of a conversation. And these prominent areas of concern we might label as four different *containers*: God, man, Christ, and response, as in "This is basically what I'm saying about God: he's loving" or "Here's what I ultimately want you to understand about human beings: we're sinful."<sup>[2]</sup>

By calling them containers, I simply mean to suggest that they are empty until someone places his or her definition inside of them. So a person might say, "God is loving, man is ignorant, Christ is a great example, and we should follow that example once enlightened." That's different content than "God is holy, man is sinful, Christ died as a substitute, and now we must respond in repentance and faith."

The problem that concerns me arises when a writer or speaker provides what I'm calling a biblical-theological presentation of the gospel, and then acts as if the job is done. So the writer will say something like this: "the essence of the gospel is the coming of God's kingdom to a world in need of rescue."

Now often, not always, but often, the writer will provide this definition over and against the definition of the gospel as penal substitution. The "gospel," we're told, is not just about the salvation of individuals through faith in Christ's death on the cross as a substitute for sin. That's so individualistic. So cerebral. So legal. Rather, God came to declare his redemptive kingdom by defeating darkness, rescuing the nations, and reconciling the entire cosmos to himself. Not only that, it's not just our "souls" that are saved. Christ came, and then Christ sent the church, to bring healing and salvation to life and body, soul and spirit, land and city.

The marvelous glut of kingdom language in the New Testament is marshaled to support this claim: "Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news'" (Mark 1:14b-15). There it is: the kingdom of God is near; believe this good news, this gospel, of the kingdom.

There are two problems going on here. The first problem, though deeply significant, is tangential to my main point here, so I'll mention it only briefly. And that is, describing the gospel as "the rescue operation of God's inaugurated kingdom" doesn't exhaust the work of biblical theology. As John Piper puts it,

The King must die before he reigns. Otherwise the justice of his reign would only bring judgment and not salvation. So all the kingdom blessings demonstrated in the Gospels had to be purchased by the blood of Christ. This is why the cross must ever be the center and foundation of the gospel and why the blessings of the gospel should not only be called gospel in relation to the cross.<sup>[3]</sup>

D. A. Carson is helpful as well:

Yet from what are human beings to be rescued? Their sin, yes; the powers of darkness; yes. But what is striking is the utter absence of any mention of the wrath of God. This is not a minor omission. Section after section of *the Bible's story* turns on the fact that God's image-bearers attract God's righteous wrath. The entire created order is under God's curse because of human sin...And it is the overcoming of this most fundamental sin that the cross and resurrection of Jesus achieve. The most urgent need of human beings is to be reconciled to God....[T]o speak constantly of the advance of the kingdom without tying kingdom themes to the passion narrative, the way the canonical Gospels do, is a terrible reductionism.<sup>[4]</sup>

In addition to not exhausting the biblical theological work and presenting a partial gospel, there's a second way in which "the gospel of the kingdom" doesn't get the job done. There is an accompanying and

overlapping failure to do the work of systematic. It's one thing to provide a biblical theological *description*. And that's great. It's God's story. Tell it again and again. But I also need—and all the other people sitting in the pews also need—systematic *application*. We need to know what to believe, and how to live. That's what systematic theology gives us.

## WHY WE NEED A SYSTEMATIC FORMULATION OF THE GOSPEL

In a sense, we cannot *not* place something inside of each of these containers no matter how we articulate the gospel. By what we say or *don't* say, we are saying something about God, something about man, something about Christ, and something about the necessary human response. The only real question is what?

So, Bishop Wright, Pastors McLaren and Bell, blue-like-jazz Miller, what are you saying to me about God? I don't think it's individualistic, overly cerebral, or beholden to Western legal categories for me to want to know what you think about God. I'm just a person who wants to know who God is. Is he loving? Holy? Like my grandpa?

And what do you think about humans? Why do they need rescuing or healing? You don't seem to emphasize sin and the penalty of sin like some other theologians I know. What does that mean you think about sin?

What about Christ? You talk a lot about his mission, his perfect life, even his resurrection. But why does each one of the Gospel writers slow the narrative way down and spend such a large percentage of their chapters on the twenty-four hours leading up to his death? Why did he have to die?

And what of our response? Do we have to do something? Nothing? Faith? Works? What?

Give me the bottom line. I need you to land the plane.

In short, are God and man separated by sin and the wrath of God or not, and what must we do?

Suppose I stand in the pulpit, at the classroom lectern, or on the street corner and say this: "God created the universe. Humanity sinned and fell from God's presence. Christ came to redeem a people. Those people look forward to their complete restoration in the new creation." That's what you might call a biblical theological narration of the gospel storyline—creation, fall, redemption, new creation (and, yes, assume, I'm expanding on each point to include language about the kingdom). Now, what's missing from this "gospel presentation"? What's missing is that I haven't addressed my hearer! I haven't done the difficult and often offensive work of applying it to *you*. God created *you* in his image. *You* have sinned against God. *You* must repent and believe in Christ's life, death, and resurrection in order to be saved.

When I apply the biblical theological narration to *you*—you who live in a certain time, in a place, who must believe certain things, and make certain decisions—I'm doing the work of systematic. I'm telling you what you absolutely must know. In a sense, my entire point can be summarized by saying that "creation, fall, redemption, new creation" becomes "God, man, Christ, response" when it's applied to individual consciences, individual human beings who will individually give an account to God.

I don't think you can say these categories are outdated by this generation or that generation, this worldview or that.<sup>[5]</sup> God, man, Christ, response—these look pretty basic to me. When these categories are not explicitly addressed, moreover, it *feels like*—this is how I've learned to work through differences with my wife; I don't say "you were," I say, "I felt," because it leaves her motives untouched and delimits my charge to an admittedly fallible subjective response—it *feels like*, as I was saying, the writer is deliberately trying not to say that God is holy, man is sinful, Christ removed the penalty of sin, and now we must repent and believe. It *feels like* they want to downplay God's holiness, and downplay the horror of sin, and downplay God's hatred of sin and the need for a justifying act of propitiation. I may not be right. I'm just saying how I feel!

(I know that it's popular among some biblical scholars today to say, "I don't do systematic, I just do exegesis." Now let me move beyond a profession of my feelings and say as plainly as I can, that's a naïve claim. Everyone has a systematic. Everyone believes *some bottom line* about God, man, Christ, and the called for response.)

## WHY WE NEED A BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL

But we should also come at the issue from the opposite angle. Our systematic formulations of the gospel must remain closely tethered to biblical theology for a couple of reasons. First, our systematic formulations are never as good as Scripture. So we must continually strive to improve them by reapplying ourselves to biblical theology.

Second, our systematic formulations do seek to address the philosophical questions and worldview categories of the day. When a new worldview emerges, or when we transplant ourselves into a new culture, it makes sense to look again at the biblical foundations; to take one step backwards from systematic to biblical theology, as it were, in order to evaluate whether a better, or tweaked, or supplemented systematic formulation might serve the occupants of that worldview or culture. But let me make three caveats here. Caveat one: this backward step should not be made by simply throwing theological tradition (small "t") out the window. The development of doctrine in the history of the church has a rationale and wisdom to it. Only the devilishly arrogant think they can chuck it and start over in order to serve the needs of the day. Caveat two: we shouldn't overestimate the differences between cultures and worldviews. All of them involve a holy God, sinful people, and a propitiating Christ. See Romans 3. Caveat three: many writers today confuse going back to biblical foundations with going back and picking their favorite texts in the interest of serving contextualization.[6]

Third, just as my wife prefers one style of reportage while I prefer another, it seems reasonable to suppose that differences of temperament mean that some personalities will be more served by a narrative, blow-by-blow approach to the gospel, while others will be better served by temporal concrete statements. (This is just a personalized version of the last point.) Yet let me again offer two caveats. First, the Ethiopian eunuch read the narrative of Isaiah 53. But he still needed Philip to *explain* it to him. Second, if in fact the kingdom storyline in Scripture mentions anything about a holy judge, a guilty verdict, and the wages of sin being death, those are probably details you will want to mention in your storytelling.

## IMPROVING OUR SYSTEMATIC FORMULATION

*To sum up*, some advocates of the so-called gospel of the kingdom seem to commit two mistakes: they don't give us all the biblical data (the point Piper and Carson affirmed), and they don't seem to give us a clear enunciation of their systematic.

Yet let me close by pointing to two ways recent writers who emphasize the gospel of the kingdom can help us to better articulate the systematic gospel of penal substitution through the "containers" of God, man, Christ, and response. First, the emphasis on the corporate dimensions of our salvation helps us to formulate a better doctrine of sin, doctrine of Christ's work, and doctrine of the church. God promised Abraham that his seed would be a blessing to the nations on earth, and Christ has come to save a people. This biblical theological data, if I might call it that, should affect our formulation of God, man, Christ, response.

- Our triune God displays his holiness and love, firstly, in his perfect and righteous relationship within his three persons. He then calls humanity to image or display this holiness and love in our relationship with him and one another.
- We, in rebellion against God, have displayed our rebellion against him by breaking his commandments and murdering and not loving one another.
- Christ came to pay the penalty of our rebellion and to win a bride, gather a flock, give life to a body, that they might be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:5; 1 Pet 2:9) who mediate God's glory to the world. His work of substitution reconciled this people to God and to one another, undoing both the vertical and horizontal estrangement which were products of the fall

and God's curse. In other words, the imperative of Hebrew 10:25—"don't forsake assembling"—follows the indicative of Christ's accomplished work of breaking down the wall of partition (Eph. 2:14-18).

- We are therefore to respond in repentance and faith—a repentance marked by love for God and neighbor in the gathering, worshipping, hospitality, and going (disciple-making) of the church.

There's no need to describe the gospel of salvation for the forgiveness of sins as individualistic. We just need to state it better.

Second, the emphasis on the kingdom or *rule* of God reminds us that our systematic formulation requires a strong understanding of faith and repentance. Faith does not mean, "I believe in Jesus; now I get off scot-free." Faith means following, trusting, repenting.

And repenting means I get off the throne and God gets back on the throne in every area of my life, which will be particularly manifest in whether or not I serve and love others (John 13:34-35; Phil 2:4ff). The kingdom of God is where the Word of God—in flesh and in writ—rules. So faith and repentance means that our lives will be marked by *listening*. We want, above all else, to *hear* God's word, so that we might *believe* it and *live* it. (How strange that so many advocates of the gospel of the kingdom refuse to deal with the word of God in a straightforward manner.)

Though my flesh sometimes wants my wife to communicate just like me—vain? Who, me?—I praise God that she doesn't. What a richer man I am because of our differences. How she teaches and humbles and sharpens me. How much more should our imperfect systematic formulations yield continually to the theology of the inerrant Word (no, I'm not saying biblical theologians are inerrant!). Praise God for inaugurating his kingdom in our fallen world through the propitiating, justifying, reconciling, ransoming, freeing work of his Son on the cross!

1. John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (P&R, 1987), 212.

2. Tim Keller makes a similar point here: [http://theresurgence.com/r\\_r\\_2006\\_session\\_seven\\_video\\_keller](http://theresurgence.com/r_r_2006_session_seven_video_keller).

3. John Piper, *God is the Gospel* (Crossway, 2005), 32.

4. Found here:

[http://www.reformation21.org/Past\\_Issues/May\\_2006/Shelf\\_Life/Shelf\\_Life/181/vobld\\_2926/pm\\_434/](http://www.reformation21.org/Past_Issues/May_2006/Shelf_Life/Shelf_Life/181/vobld_2926/pm_434/)

5. In his discussion referenced above as well as at the 2006 Desiring God conference (click here:

[http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/EventMessages/ByDate/1832\\_The\\_Supremacy\\_of\\_Christ\\_and\\_the\\_Gospel\\_in\\_a\\_Postmodern\\_World](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/EventMessages/ByDate/1832_The_Supremacy_of_Christ_and_the_Gospel_in_a_Postmodern_World)), Keller makes the point that among many in today's post-modern culture, it's not enough to just briefly say "God, man, Christ, faith" and expect people to understand what we're talking about. Instead, he says we should help people to understand the gospel within the context of their worldviews. I don't see myself as disagreeing with this. My point is merely that the systematic categories themselves are valid. Keller's point is helpful for instructing us to take greater care in sensitively defining those categories for today's generations and worldviews.

6. For example, Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in the New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (IVP, 2000).

*Jonathan Leeman is the director of communications for 9Marks.*

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Jonathan Leeman

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## Recommend Books on Biblical Theology For Church Members

At 9Marks, we want the members of churches to know how to read their Bibles. Walk into Capitol Hill Baptist Church's "bookstall" and you'll find these books on biblical theology for sale:

### D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, volumes 1 and 2 (Crossway, 1998, 1999).

Subtitled "A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God's Word," these daily devotions line up, in slightly modified form, with Robert Murray M'Cheyne's reading through the Bible in a year (or two) program. So readers are encouraged to read passage from Scripture, and then to read Carson's one page explanation of how the passage fits into a biblical theology context.



### Mark Dever, *Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made and Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept* (Crossway, 2005, 2006)

These two volumes are Mark Dever's Bible-book "overview sermons," originally preached to his congregation over the space of a decade. Each chapter (or sermon) sums up the message of one book of the Bible within the context of redemption history. Devotional and application heavy. Study questions placed at the end of every chapter.



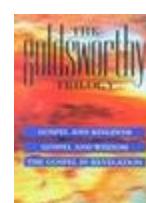
### Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: An Introductory Biblical Theology* (IVP, 1991).

Presents a slightly more extended, intermediate-level introduction to biblical theology than Goldsworthy's *Gospel and Kingdom*. From the back cover: "How do the Old and New Testaments fit together? What is the point of biblical theology? What is the overall story of the Bible? What difference does it make? This introductory text answers these questions with an integrated theology of both Old and New Testaments that avoids unnecessary technicalities." Charts, highlighted summaries, and study questions are at the end of each chapter. [Go to 9marks.org for a 9Marks review of this book.](#)



### Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy: Gospel and Kingdom, Gospel and Wisdom, The Gospel in Revelation* (Paternoster, 2000)

Three books in one. The first, *Gospel and Kingdom*, is one of our two favorite entry-level introductions to biblical theology (the other is Vaughn Roberts' below). Goldsworthy sums up the Bible as the story of God's people, in God's place, under God's rule, and he traces this story through the entire Bible. [Go to 9marks.org for a 9Marks review of this book.](#)



### Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Eerdmans, 2000)

After establishing the basics of the nature of revelation, the unity of Scripture, and what biblical theology is, Goldsworthy helps the preacher discover how to preach Christ from every book and genre of Scripture.



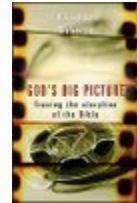
**David E. Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Eerdmans, 1995)**

An intermediate-level examination of how Christ is the fulfillment of all of God's promises to Israel.



**Vaughn Roberts, *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (IVP, 2002)**

Our other favorite entry-level introduction to biblical theology (see Goldsworthy's *The Goldsworthy Trinity* above). Following Goldsworthy, Roberts traces the storyline of the Bible as the story of the coming of God's kingdom. Some have found Roberts easier to read than Goldsworthy. Study questions are interspersed throughout the book. **Go to 9marks.org for a 9Marks review of this book.**



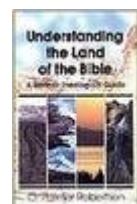
**O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (P&R, 1980)**

Whereas authors like Goldsworthy or Roberts employ the concept of God's "kingdom" as the primary theme for characterizing redemption history, covenant theologians like Robertson employ the complementary concept of "covenant" to tell the story of God's work of salvation. Robertson argues that a theological unity subsists between the various biblical covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, etc.), which he, following in a long line of theologians, calls a "covenant of grace." While Baptists and Presbyterians might disagree on the degree of continuity and discontinuity between the old covenant and new in this overarching concept of the "covenant of grace," Robertson's book provides a useful introduction to the covenants generally.



**O. Palmer Robertson, *Understanding the Land of the Bible: A Biblical Theological Guide***

Robertson helps readers see how the geography of ancient Palestine (mountains, plains, valleys, rivers, and cities) impact the meaning of biblical events and God's work of salvation.



You may also want to encourage your congregation to read **Thabiti Anyabwile's article "1st Mark of a Healthy Church Member: Biblical Theologian"** at the 9Marks website.

**Other books on biblical theology recommended by 9Marks:**

- T. Desmond Alexander and Brian Rosner eds, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (IVP, 2000)
- David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible*, rev'd ed. (IVP, 1991)
- Edmund Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Crossway, 2003)
- Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*. In *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, in *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, edited by D. A. Carson (IVP, 2003)
- William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants*, in *Biblical and Theological Classics Library*. Paternoster Press, 1997.
- Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, new ed. (Banner of Truth, 1996)
- Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (P&R, 1980; repr. 2000)
- Just about anything in the *New Studies in Biblical Theology* series edited by D. A. Carson.

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## One of the Dirtiest Words Today: C-----n

By Brad Wheeler

I was recently called in for my semi-annual performance review where I work as a financial advisor. My regional manager was dutifully engaging me in pleasantries about life and family when I casually mentioned that I would be preaching at my local church the following Sunday.

As if on cue, my manager smiled, leaned back into the folds of his leather chair, and launched into a monologue about how preachers can be wonderful financial advisors because they have a "way with words and with people." Preachers are "the best story-tellers," and so on.

With sadness I noted his conception of preachers as "story-tellers," but I politely nodded and genuinely appreciated his desire to connect with me. He then lamented the poor "preachers" he has heard in his Reform Jewish context. Yet, he proceeded to say, he felt confident that I did a better job in "motivating others to be better people," since "that's really what it's all about."

Not wanting to lose an opportunity for the gospel (and perhaps dispel the notion of preachers as mere story-tellers), I tried, albeit poorly, to draw an analogy between what I aim to do in preaching and what I aim to do in financial advising. In advising, I review a person's financial status, assess the dangers and potential pitfalls of his current position, and then attempt to direct him down a path of financial security. "The task of preaching can be similar," I noted. "I help them know something about God and their precarious position apart from him, and I then point them toward the good news of the gospel in Jesus Christ."

My analogy didn't have the intended effect, or perhaps it did, for he quickly retorted, "you're not actually trying to *convert* people, are you?"

I could tell from his response that I had just crossed the line and confirmed his greatest fear: I was one of those Christians. You know, the kind who doesn't respect other people's personal beliefs, who insensitively interfere in other people's business, and who arrogantly presume that you must think like them—or else.

He did not say as much, but it was written all over his face. With a smile I said, "Sure I am. Does that surprise you?"

He didn't know quite how to respond, and so in the ensuing minutes I tried to help him understand that the gospel is not merely about making people behave better outwardly, but being born again from within (John 3). A Christian is one who *repents* of their sin and *believes* in Christ (cf. Mk 1:14). Sadly, what my Jewish friend found so obnoxious was not Christ's claim upon his life that he repent and believe, but that I actually preached this message of conversion to others.

### CONVERSION—A DIRTY WORD?

What's the point of the story? Conversion is dirty word. It's scandalous in today's pluralistic and relativistic world to contend for one religious truth over and against another. It smacks of pride, arrogance, disrespect, perhaps hatred, maybe even violence.



This is the consensus among many of the secular elite. Popular television personality Bill Maher believes Christianity can only be explained as a "neurological disorder."<sup>[1]</sup> Only the most unenlightened, uneducated, and uncouth Neanderthal would both believe and contend for a conversion to religious faith, especially Christianity. It's absolutely what the modern man does *not* need.

And Maher simply represents what secular humanism as a movement has been saying all along. To quote from their own manifesto, "traditional theism... and salvationism... based on mere affirmation is harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival."<sup>[2]</sup> Reasonable minds...you can hear the condescension dripping from the pen.

Some go further, of course. They say such attempts at diversion (i.e. conversion) actually breed violence. In a publicized letter to the Pope John Paul II, Hindu scholar Swami Dayananda Saraswati argued that "religious conversion destroys centuries-old communities and incites communal violence. It is violence and it breeds violence."<sup>[3]</sup>

There is a sense in which I agree with Saraswati. Forced conversion at the edge of a sword--be it in modern day Islam or ninth-century "Christianity" under Charlemagne--will incite violence. But of course for Saraswati and the liberal academic establishment, it is no less violent, demeaning, and contemptible to simply say the words out loud, "hell does exist, and people will consciously suffer for eternity on account of their sins." Such is the confused world we live in.

Of course, a Christian should not be too surprised when the world scorns and derides his or her message (though neither should we erect needless opposition to the gospel and then glory in our persecution as a Christian badge of honor). We are promised that the message of the cross is nothing other than foolishness to those who are perishing (cf. 1 Cor 1:18). And yet there is a sense of embarrassment in some ostensibly Christian circles for "conversionist" theology. Ashamed of their heritage, these self-professed Christians attempt to blaze a new (i.e. better) and more respectable path forward.

Just in recent months the Vatican and World Council of Churches--which includes more than 350 mainline Protestant, Orthodox, and related churches--began working on a "common code for religious conversions." Input is also being solicited from Muslim leaders.

The fact that the various constituencies within this group hold to differing gospels ought to make us immediately suspect. Nonetheless, their hope is to "distinguish between witness and proselytism, making respect for freedom of thought, conscience and the religion of others a primary concern in any encounter between people of different faiths."<sup>[4]</sup>

The specific findings and recommendations of this commission will not be complete for another few years, but a few things are patently clear. For starters, "respect" is cherished and prized above everything, including truth. And the way to show respect to others is to not proselytize them (seek their conversion), but to bear witness to one's own truth while appreciating their truth.

In short, what used to be understood as the radical need for regeneration and conversion has been eviscerated. We might say that this common code for religious conversion is really just a common code for *non*-conversion.

Yet it seems that conversion is even under attack among some professed evangelicals. This ought to strike us as nonsensical. Our English word "evangelical" comes from the Greek word for "good news." What is this good news? It is that we, who are at enmity with God in our sin, can now be reconciled to him on account of Christ's death and resurrection, when we repent of our sin and believe upon Christ. Conversion from our former way of life and thinking to Christianity is required. This much should be blatantly obvious.

Nonetheless, Brian MacLaren, perhaps the most prominent leader within the emerging church movement, calls for a reconsideration of conversion, if not an outright rejection of it. He writes in *A Generous Orthodoxy*,

I must add, though, that I don't believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (though not all) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish contexts. This will be hard, you say, and I agree. But frankly, it's not at all easy to be a follower of Jesus in many 'Christian' religious contexts, either.[5]

We are told to embrace other faiths "willingly, not begrudgingly." To be fair, McLaren asserts the uniqueness of Christianity apart from other religions.[6] And yet his belief in "a gospel that is universally efficacious for the whole earth," his unwillingness to "set limits on the saving power of God" in reference to the unevangelized, and his belief that we must continually expect to "rediscover the gospel" as we encounter other religious traditions, "leading to that new place where none of us has ever been before," raises significant and serious questions.[7] Frankly, I have difficulty seeing how he is recommending anything Christian, let alone orthodox. In the end, his proposals are eerily similar to those being set forth by the Vatican and the WCC.

## CONVERSION—A BIBLICAL IDEA?

Given how narrow-minded and bigoted conversion appears to the modern mind, must we contend for it as Christians? In other words, is a doctrine of conversion biblically required?

Absolutely. Although, the word is rare in the New Testament (cf. Matt 23:15; Acts 6:5; 15:3; 1 Tim 3:6), the idea of conversion is central to the storyline of Scripture.

The common words in Hebrew (*shub*) and Greek (*epistrephô*) that picture conversion are regularly translated "turn," "turn back," "return," or "restore" in our English text. We read in Ezekiel 33:11, "Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they *turn* from their ways and live. *Turn! Turn* from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'"

Similarly in Isaiah 55:7: "Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him *turn* to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon."

In the New Testament, Paul says that Christ sent him to the Gentiles in order to "open their eyes and *turn* them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18). He also recounts how the church in Thessalonica "*turned* to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thes 1:9).

Luke says of John the Baptist, "Many of the people of Israel will he *bring back* to the Lord their God" (Luke 1:16).

This picture of conversion as "turning" or "returning" is also seen in Christ's regular call to "follow me," as when he says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and *follow me*" (cf. Matt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Luke 9:23). Or, "anyone who does not take his cross and *follow me* is not worthy of me" (Matt 10:38). Following Christ is costly. Taking up one's cross means forsaking everything. To the individual enslaved to his wealth, for instance, Jesus says, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, *follow me*" (Mark 10:21). To the disciple who wants to bury his father, Jesus commands, "*Follow me*, and let the dead bury their own dead" (Matt 8:22).

## CONVERSION—WHAT IT IS AND ISN'T

So what exactly is conversion? Can we sum it up?

### ***Repentance and Faith***

First, this picture of conversion as turning from self, and humbly following after God, can be captured in two words—*repentance* and *faith*. Conversion equals repentance and faith. In conversion, we turn our

minds, emotions, and wills from the service of an idol (namely, self) to another (God). By faith we then trust in God and his word, believing like Abraham and all of God's saints that he who promised is faithful. In this sense, conversion and repentance are inextricably linked. As one writer helpfully puts it,

*Repentance*, the forsaking of sin and the cultivating of a new hope, and *faith*, turning to Christ in belief and trust, are related to one another as two sides of a coin. The two are *interdependent* responses, each incomplete without the other. Thus conversion involves both a believing repentance and a penitent faith.[8]

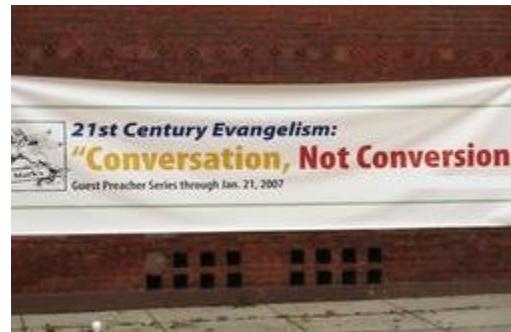
### ***Radical and Costly***

Second, the call to conversion is both *radical* and *costly*. It is costly because it necessitates the denial of self. To follow Christ is to subjugate all earthly pleasures and desires before his will. We ourselves, even our family, all take backstage before this unyielding commitment to our king.

It is radical because it exchanges darkness for light, dead idols for the living God, the passing wealth of this life for the enduring riches of heaven. The radical nature of conversion is also witnessed in some of the more extraordinary conversion accounts recorded in the book of Acts (cf. Paul in ch. 9; Cornelius in ch. 10; Philippian jailer in ch. 16). Even if the process is slow and we can't point to a moment in time when the Lord brought us out of the realm of darkness and into the realm of light, this doesn't mean the change is any less dramatic and distinct. One is no longer a child of the devil, but has been adopted as a child of God (cf. 1 Jn 3:10).

### ***Not Mere Dialogue***

Third, conversion is *not mere dialogue* or conversation. Sadly, this is commonly misunderstood. Dialogue is often presented almost as an end itself. I share my Christian experiences, you share your Buddhist experiences, and we're both the better for it, since "we're all recipients of the same mercy, sharing in the same mystery." [9]



But dialogue is not the end, conversion is. Of course, no conversion can take place without respectful dialogue, and no conversion is possible unless God initiates supernatural change in the heart. Nonetheless, we do not walk away from a dialogue happy if our friend still rejects Christ. Rather, like the prophets of the Old Testament, Christ, and Paul, we weep and mourn for those who remain in their sin and refuse to follow after God (cf. Matt 23:7).

### ***Not Just a Journey***

Fourth, conversion is *not a journey*. In a journey one may wander, but never arrive. He may learn, but never comes to any conclusion. Many today say that the journey (merely learning) is itself sufficient.

But journeying is not enough. We must enter into God's kingdom. We must reach the final destination, for there will come a time when the bridegroom will come, and those that are not with him will be shut out of the wedding feast (Matt 25:10).

### ***Not Optional***

Fifth, the call to conversion is *neither optional nor negotiable*. The biblical writers do not merely encourage, but command in the most unequivocal terms that all must turn and follow after God in Christ. Notice how many of the commands above are accompanied with a corresponding warning. Failure to repent and turn to God is no minor matter. It forfeits life for death, judgment and hell.

And yet the call to conversion is never accompanied with physical force, manipulation, or coercion. Christians should persuade and reason with words, no more (2 Cor 4:1-2). Their only "sword" is the word of God and the witness of their lives. Nothing could be sharper or more effective (cf. Heb 4:12).

So just how biblically necessary is conversion? When Paul and Barnabas were at Lystra and Derbe, the people witnessed their miracles and confused them for the Greek gods of Zeus and Hermes. Paul and Barnabas' response is instructive:

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them" (Ac 14:14-15).

There would be no syncretism, no amalgamation of the Christian gospel and Greek mythology (or Buddhism, or Hinduism, or anything else for that matter). Paul and Barnabas insisted that all turn from these worthless false gods to the living God. They insisted on nothing short of a wholehearted, radical conversion.

## BENEFITS FOR BELIEVERS

Conversion lies at the very heart of Christianity. To sacrifice it is to sacrifice nothing other than the gospel and the good news it promises to all. This is surely reason enough to defend a clear and robust understanding of biblical conversion. Lord willing, we'll think more about the theological doctrine and its implications in our next piece.

But do we need to say anything more? Here are just two reasons why a proper understanding of conversion is important not only to God and the unconverted in our midst, but to our own spiritual well-being as believers.

### ***Humility***

First, a proper understanding of conversion promotes humility and makes grace meaningful. Paul writes, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Col 1:21-22ff).

Or consider Peter, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pet 3:18).

What were we? Before conversion, we were unrighteous, alienated, and enemies of God. And this is not figurative language or hyperbole. We concern ourselves with terror attacks, invest in costly alarm systems for our homes, and fret over whether our cars have side air bags—all in an attempt to feel safe and secure. But imagine for a moment what it would be like to have the God of the universe as *your* enemy. The Bible says we really were at enmity with God, and more to the point, he with us (cf. Ja 4:4)!

How else can we explain the pain, agony, and wrath of the cross, if not that God was propitiating his own anger towards us, enemies of his holiness and justice?

If conversion is not necessary, neither is the cross.

We must preach the gospel to ourselves again and again, remembering in all humility what we deserved, and then rejoicing at the tremendous grace God has shown in reconciling us through the cross of Christ.

## **Missions**

Second, a proper understanding of conversion fuels our missionary endeavors. The world is in danger. There is a spiritual battle for the souls of men. Satan would like nothing more than to see today's church lulled into complacency by suggesting that a radical conversion to Christianity isn't finally necessary. "Sure," the voices of inclusivism or universalism say, "it might be preferable to call for conversion, but is it really necessary? A first-class airline seat may be preferable to a coach ticket, but both finally arrive at the same destination, right? So let people remain where they are." By definition, both inclusivism (which says that some "anonymous Christians" may be saved through Christ, even though they haven't consciously repented and believed in him) and universalism (which says that all humanity will be saved) destroy the biblical witness and our impetus for world missions.

We do well to remember these words of Christ instead:

Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 13:47-50).

Only in Christ are all made alive and reconciled to God (cf. 1 Cor 15:22). Thus, it is absolutely incumbent upon any Christian to preach this call to conversion, imploring all to be reconciled to God through Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:17-21).

## **CONCLUSION: ONE OF THOSE CHRISTIANS?**

"You're not actually trying to convert people, are you?" That moment with my boss was uncomfortable. No one wants to share the gospel only to receive the look of death and horror that cries, "you honestly believe that... about God...about me? How could you?!"

I don't enjoy being divisive any more than the next guy. And yet the gospel presents two dialectically opposed ways to live. We are either saved or unsaved, converted or unconverted, a sheep or a goat, a God-worshipper or an idolater, a son of God or a son of the devil, on the narrow path or on the broad path, in the realm of light or darkness, destined for heaven or condemned to hell. We neglect or reject this doctrine at our own peril.

Robert Duncan Culver said it well:

Conversion is as important to the experience and ministry of every minister of the Word and genuine Christian witness as birth to a baby or oxygen to a fire. Without it we are nothing in the kingdom of God and, Jesus said, destined to be cast out of it and, like weeds in the wheat field at harvest time, to be removed from the field and burned in the fire where 'there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Mat 13:36-42). [10]

Don't be apologetic. Be one of *those* Christians. Conversion may be a dirty word, but if so it is the one dirty word the Christian must preach with all boldness and passion.

Besides, what's the alternative? Telling people that this world is enough? That their selfish, vain, addiction-ridden, and futile lives are just fine the way they are? That being renewed in the image of God is not all that its cracked up to be?

I can't imagine anything more discouraging—and damning!

1. See [http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE\\_ID=42906](http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=42906). The broader context is as follows. "We are a nation that is unenlightened because of religion. I do believe that. I think that religion stops people from thinking. I think it justifies crazies. I think flying planes into buildings was a faith-based initiative. I think religion is a neurological disorder." In the interview Maher goes on to say, "I don't hate America. I love America. I am just embarrassed that it

has been taken over by people like evangelicals, by people who do not believe in science and rationality. It is the 21st century. And I will tell you, my friend. The future does not belong to evangelicals."

2. See <http://www.americanhumanist.org/about/manifesto2.html>.
3. See [http://www.maaber.50megs.com/eighth\\_issue/open\\_letter\\_e.htm](http://www.maaber.50megs.com/eighth_issue/open_letter_e.htm).
4. See their press release at <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/pressreleasesen.nsf/index/pr-06-12.html>.
5. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004 Paperback), 293.
6. Ibid, 283 and 295.
7. Ibid, 124, 294, 293. Additionally, when asked about the exclusivity of the gospel (which would necessitate a conversion to Christ in contrast to an "inclusive" or "universal" gospel that offers hope to all, including the unconverted in this life), McLaren simply says such questions are "weapons of mass distraction." He dismisses the question and refuses to answer. Sadly, this non-answer is an answer. See *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 42.
8. Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1997), 263-4.
9. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 291.
10. Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology*, (Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 700.

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November 2006  
Brad Wheeler

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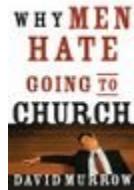
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## Book Review: Why Men Hate Going to Church

By David Murrow

Reviewed by Jamie Dunlop



Nelson, 2005, 224 pp, \$13.99

Why do men hate going to church? Even for this reviewer—who attends a church with no discernable gender gap (48 percent male)—the topic is pressing given the female-preponderant membership of many churches. *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, by David Murrow, explores the elements of American church life that discourage attendance and engagement of men.

His conclusion? Churches have shifted toward a style that is comfortable for the stereotypical woman—at the expense of the stereotypical man. And by men, Murrow is referring to *masculine* men: "Tough, earth-working guys . . . high achievers, alpha males, risk takers, and visionaries" as set against "the quiet, introspective gentlemen who populate the church today" (6).

Arguing from data and anecdote, Murrow describes the elements of today's church that are unattractive to unchurched men, and then prescribes a solution.

### AN ENLIGHTENING DIAGNOSIS

Murrow's description of church elements that are foreign and uncomfortable to men is enlightening and useful. And some of the changes he calls for turn out to be quite biblical—including changes largely derided by more theologically "progressive" denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (USA) in which Murrow serves as an elder.

Murrow points to four categories of church elements that clash with the temperament of most unchurched men.

#### **1. Church makes men feel uncomfortable because it emphasizes feminine values**

Murrow states that many elements of modern churches—from music to vocabulary to the dress code—emphasize values that are more easily associated with femininity than masculinity. For example, sentimental songs that celebrate the intimacy of relationship with Jesus Christ bring a more feminine style of worship. As Murrow writes, "Think of the mental gymnastics that must take place inside a man's subconscious mind as he sings lyrics like these. He's trying to express his love to Jesus, a man who lives today, using words no man would dare say to another, set to music that sounds like the love songs his wife listens to in the car" (139).

A second example of overemphasis on feminine values in the church is a desire for comfort at the expense of risk. Murrow writes in chapter 4, "Velvet Coffin Christianity is the real cancer in the church today. Its key characteristic is comfort. Everyone is so nice to each other. And we choose a church based on how comfortable it makes us feel . . . Men gag on this kind of religion" (27).

Murrow's reaction against this overemphasis is one of the high points of the book: "Today's church is all about safety. What's our top prayer request? 'God, keep us safe. Keep our kids safe. Watch over us and protect us.' God's job is to keep our well-ordered lives flowing smoothly" (162). Churches that focus on their own comfort will cease to attract men, Murrow warns, and churches without men are prone to turn inward, away from their call to change the world.

#### **2. Church forces men to do things that they find uncomfortable**

From asking men to sing in public, to sermons that are longer than the space between television commercials, Murrow showcases elements of church life that are uncomfortable for most unchurched men.

### **3. Men assume that church will require them to give up masculine traits**

Murrow lists a number of men's misconceptions about what they must give up to become part of a church. They assume church will make them "dorky" and "nerdy"—the equivalent of the evangelical Christian Ned Flanders from the Simpsons cartoon.

### **4. Church does not present a compelling model of leadership**

One assumption that underlies much of Murrow's thinking on leadership is that "If men are to return to Christ, they need strong, godly laymen to help them in their walk . . . For too long we have asked men to follow our teaching, our methods, and our theology. Men do not follow these things. I'll say it again: *men follow men.*" It is difficult to argue with the premise that visionary leaders are the source of much change in this world. As a result, Murrow castigates the church for its inability to inspire men to greatness.

## **AN UNHELPFUL PRESCRIPTION**

Murrow's descriptive analysis is eye-opening, and should provoke that wonderful masculine trait of wanting to offer a solution. Yet finding a solution requires us to determine which elements of church life are *unnecessarily* off-putting, and which are a natural result of the church's mission.

Yet at this point the book under-serves its readers. Murrow's conclusions never engage with the church's God-given mission—demonstrating the power of the gospel by acting in a way that is utterly distinct from the world. In fact, the book ignores both the God-given distinctiveness of the church and the power of the gospel that propels it.

To take one example, Murrow refers to two men who became Christians after first serving in churches in order to make this point: "the lesson is clear: if we want to win more men to Christ, ask them to deploy their gifts in the church, even if they are not yet *in Christ*" (209). Yet I fear that asking non-Christians to serve as a part of the church's regular ministry will only confuse the world about the distinction between the church and the world. If the mission of the church is to make worldly men feel comfortable, then this recommendation—and many others in the book—makes sense. But if that mission is to corporately showcase God's glory to a fallen world, then such prescriptions have no part in God's church.

Yet not only does Murrow ignore the distinct nature of the church's mission, he ignores the power of the gospel that is the primary attractant of men (and women) to the church. While the book routinely examines the reasons why a worldly man might choose to attend church, it never examines the role that lives changed by the gospel should have in that attraction—something that should be central to this book. For instance, Murrow observes that large churches have less of a gender gap than do small churches. He asks, "Do men attend because the church is large, or does the church grow large because men attend?" (58) It sounds as if any church will have the ability to change lives if only men will participate. But what about a third option: churches will attract people (both men and women) when the true gospel is preached and believed and lived out.

The sad truth is that many churches call themselves Christian with no practical understanding of the Christian gospel. Some are so theologically "liberal" that they have renounced the reality of sin. Some are so theologically "conservative" that their legalism suppresses the life-changing power of the gospel they profess. Without the gospel, a church is dead.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Murrow's descriptions are useful and adept. But the book's usefulness declines dramatically as it turns to prescription. Murrow roots his recommendations in doing away with what rubs

worldly men the wrong way—rather than viewing this challenge within the context of the scriptural mission of the church and the biblical principles God has ordained to govern the church.

God calls the church to be in the world but not of the world—not unnecessarily offensive, but separate and distinct. Simply fitting the church to the surrounding world inevitably sacrifices one of God's greatest evangelistic tools: the fact that the church is a community that operates with a set of values that are foreign to those of the surrounding world.

At times, Murrow pays lip service to the fact that we cannot tune the church to suit every masculine desire, but his determination that Scripture is impractical in this endeavor is tragic (10). Accordingly, he spends few words exploring how to reduce the offense of the church in a way that does not sacrifice its mission.

There is a gender gap in the majority of American churches—suburban and urban, Protestant and Roman Catholic, theologically conservative and liberal. *Why Men Hate Going to Church* provides an eye-opening look at the elements of church life that push men out the door. Yet because Murrow moves from description to prescription without safeguarding those elements that are essential to the church's Scriptural mission, the hard work of setting out recommendations in light of this mission remains in the hands of the reader.

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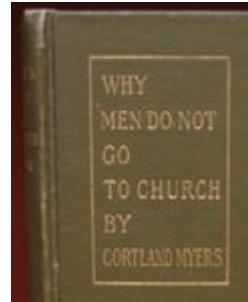
## Book Review: Why Do Men Not Go to Church?

By Cortland Myers  
Reviewed by Ken Barbic

Funk & Wagnalls, 1899, 148 pp

[Editor's note: see Mark Dever's blog entry on this book at [www.togetherforthegospel.org](http://www.togetherforthegospel.org)]

Today is the age of target marketing. Savvy advertisers constantly ask themselves, "How can we make our product more desirable to the various groups who are presently unaware of its benefits?"



It's in this vein that Cortland Myers raises the question in his book by the title, "Why do men not go to church?" This is, he says, "one of the burning questions of the hour."

Is this just one more of the recent spate of books on the topic of men and church, like Mark Chanski's 2004 *Manly Dominion* or David Murrow's 2005 *Why Men Hate Going to Church*?

Not at all. Cortland Myers wrote this book over hundred years ago—in 1899! Myers was minister at Baptist Temple in Brooklyn, New York when he wrote this book. Shortly thereafter, in 1909, he became pastor at Tremont Temple in Boston, MA.[1]

Like today's authors, Myers gives statistical analysis to support his thesis. He claims that not more than 3 percent of the male population of New York City was a member of a Protestant church. Furthermore: "of the membership of the church nearly three-fourths are women," and "in one great church I counted two hundred women and ten men"(x).[2]

Apparently, the problem was such that Myers felt compelled to do more than write a book. In 1911, David Lockrow was hired to lead a Tremont Temple Brotherhood. This organization was established for the express means of attracting men to the church by offering the men Bible classes, piano lessons, gymnastics, a bowling league, and an employment bureau. One historian says of the brotherhood, "The emphasis on activity and outreach drew from current understanding of the kind of religion that attracted men." [3]

In the book, Myers addresses the problem of why men are not in church in three parts: faults of the church, faults of the man, and faults of society. Given both his argument and the number of pages he devotes to each of these topics, it's clear he places the greatest burden of fault on the church.

Here, many of his observations are helpful, such as the suggestion that churches should unite around the cross (79), encourage an atmosphere of "brotherhood" (69), implement church discipline (62), and foster dependence on the Holy Spirit (83). At the same time, Myers doesn't always use Scripture as his point of departure in making recommendations.

Instead, he seems to be something of a schizophrenic thinker. He perceives a problem, seeks to identify the causes, and then suggests what he believes are appropriate solutions. Unfortunately, little Scripture guides him, and he ends up contradicting himself in various sections of the book. For instance, he says,

The principle which lies at the foundation of every successful business is, 'find out what men want and then give it to them.' That same principle must enter largely into the success of the religious as well as the commercial enterprise"(21).

Yet later on, he says,

[The church] stands unique and alone. It is on earth as the Divine channel for the salvation of the immortal soul from sin and condemnation. It is, therefore, unjust and unreasonable to compare it with any of the world's organizations (97).

### **Back to the Future?**

We can sympathize with Myers's desire to address the concerns of the church in the early 1900s. Like him, we don't want to present truth in the most boring manner possible, and we don't want, personally or corporately, to create unnecessary obstructions to gospel belief.

Yet Myers, like so many today, appeared to believe that *getting the method right* was the largest problem faced by the church of his day. He certainly doesn't say that the gospel and personal holiness are not important, but such matters do seem to get minimized as his search for solutions leads toward the methods of the modern world.

Society, business, politics, home, and everything have undergone a marked change within the last quarter of a century. The church has lost her grip upon these times if she does not move with them (15).

The old truth is sacred; old methods may not be. Truth cannot be changed; methods must always be changing. Aggressive inventiveness is the greatest factor in success from the human side (15).

The church for the times must meet the needs of the time. It must be of the Columbus spirit, and, with consecrated determination, discover the new world. It will find the discord in the music of modern life, and bring it back to key-note and harmony. It will brave any storm, and sail any sea to reach the great continent of man's needs, and to satisfy the longings in his heart (19-20).

Myers appears to have had a strong desire to see people come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. He protested loudly against denominational liberalism in the Northeast, and he was a staunch opponent of biblical higher criticism. But in the midst of standing against doctrinal heresy and worldliness, and correctly identifying some of the dangers of the industrial revolution, he neglected to see the more subtle forms of worldliness associated with the early 1900s, such as the gradual increase of a consumerist mindset.

Likewise today, many evangelical voices speak loudly on issues of real importance to a Christian understanding of the world. Meanwhile, we can fail to recognize when common cultural structures and practices have a damaging impact on the faith. We quickly decry national sins and seek political change, while utilizing the tools of a consumer driven culture to attract new attendees.

As the church, we must be careful to consider how we allow ourselves to be guided by today's cultural ethos. There is less moral and spiritual neutral-ground in our culture than most people suppose there is.

As I read Myers, I couldn't help but think of C. S. Lewis's comments on why we should read old books:

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period...We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century—the blindness about which posterity will ask, "But how could they have thought that?"—lies where we have never suspected it, and concerns something about which there is untroubled agreement between Hitler and President Roosevelt or between Mr. H. G. Wells and Karl Barth. None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books.[4]

We often don't see the full effect our thinking today has on the church tomorrow. Therefore, we need to fight for a historical perspective that will confront and correct our shortsighted tendencies. Without a proper understanding of our modern context in relation to the past we become, as David Wells says, "like the proverbial frog in the pot beneath which a fire has been kindled. Because the water temperature rises slowly, the frog remains unaware of the danger until it is too late. In the same way, the Church often seems to be blithely unaware of the peril that now surrounds it."<sup>[5]</sup>

May the Lord give us humility and wisdom to recognize our own areas of blindness.

### New Problems or Old Solutions?

While various methods should change depending on the culture and context in which we minister, it is shortsighted and theologically misguided to believe that these are the primary impediments to men's acceptance of the gospel or attendance in the church.

Instead, churches must continue to focus on the centrality of the gospel and a historically accurate perspective of the church's role and function that does not shift from one perceived problem to another, but that instead recognizes God's faithfulness to build his church, regardless of what we perceive as the gender breakdown of our congregations today.

1. For a more extensive history of Tremont Temple, read *Fundamentalists in the City* by Margaret Lamberts Bendroth (Oxford University Press, 2005). She says the following about Myers' church: "literally housed in a theater and led by clergymen with both professional and amateur acting credentials, Tremont Temple emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a focal point of revivalist Protestantism in Boston...at the turn of the century, Tremont Temple was approaching its heyday, its auditorium regularly filled with people eager for a good show and some spiritual inspiration along the way" (107). Then came the Myers era: "Tremont Temple was also not averse to forms of popular entertainment usually considered anathema to doctrinaire fundamentalists. Beginning in Myer's pastorate, Tremont Temple began to meet expenses by showing feature films...Proceeds from movie nights eventually liquidated half a million dollars' worth of church debt and financed a new organ" (117-118).
2. Surely, it doesn't appear that Myers was doing the kind of statistical analysis that characterizes the social sciences today.
3. Bendroth, *Fundamentalists in the City*, 115. Bendroth's book provides numbers on gender breakdowns based on research she did of the church's membership records. Interestingly, it appears that the gender gap at Tremont Temple steadily increased over the course of his ministry.
4. Quote taken from <http://blog.togetherforthegospel.org/duncan.html>
5. David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Eerdmans, 1993), 91.

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## Book Review: *Manly Dominion: In a Passive-Purple-Four-Ball World*

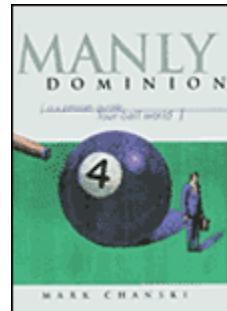
By Mark Chanski

Reviewed by Owen Strachan

Calvary Press, 2004, 247 pp, \$16.95

We are a generation of wimps raised by mystics.

Such are many Christian men today. Exaggerated piety, deficient manliness, and outright cowardice have conspired to bring about the current state of affairs.



I can say that is true from my own life. Many a decision has left me paralyzed. Which girl to pursue? Which job to take? Which pair of socks to wear? So it is for much of my generation. From the great to the small, we confront the decisions of life with a position of weakness, believing that no decision should be made unless

i) direct revelation has unquestionably led us to it (in which case we may cite divine providence as the reason behind our decision, should said decision prove disastrous)

or

ii) every conceivable factor points to it (in which case we can blame each factor, should said decision proves disastrous).

This is a sad picture indeed.

How welcome, then, is Mark Chanski's *Manly Dominion*. Chanski, a Reformed Baptist pastor from Holland, Michigan, has penned this text to encourage the wimpy-hearted to think, pray, and act like men.

According to Chanski, contemporary Christian masculinity lacks the will to take dominion of the earth, that mandate which rang first in Adam's ears as recorded in Genesis 1:28. Chanski summarizes his central argument on page 18 by exhorting the reader to recognize that "Man is to aggressively *dominate* his environment, instead of allowing his environment to *dominate* him." He does this only by the grace of God: "Subduing labor achieves its goals only by divine enablement" (47).

Chanski understands that men will only act out manly dominion through the power of God himself. With that power before them, men are to act. "I have not been assigned to stare out my bedroom, living room, or office window, passively daydreaming about what I *might* do, *if only* there weren't so many obstacles. Rather I am to get out there, so help me God, and plan it, clear it, and *do it*, with all my might, to the glory of God" (18).

Chanski's thesis is itself aggressive, scriptural, and invigorating. He combines biblical study with a vibrant collection of stories, historical examples, and personal testimony to lay out the importance of acting courageously in one's work, decision-making, spiritual life, and romance. *Manly Dominion* will be of great help to pastors in their efforts to encourage strong male leadership in local churches, especially in the following areas.

### Living Industriously

Men have been indoctrinated to believe that work is bad. We have been trained by commercials, music, movies, and television shows to be lazy and passive. Chanski cuts the cultural attitude no quarter.

Countering the spirit of disgruntled aimlessness, he writes, "In contrast, we ought to view ourselves as men of destiny, each created by the Lord and placed in this garden, in this world, with a very important task to accomplish" (58).

Indeed, "Each of us has been endowed with talents and opportunities to accomplish great things in the Lord's world" (59).

Chanski gives us the big picture behind all of life here, articulating that God has given us gifts to accomplish meaningful work for him while we are here. This is a helpful point for the pastor trying to figure out how to counter secular gender theory with its emphasis on passive masculinity. Give 'em Chanski, and watch them come to life.

## Making Decisions

Chanski is equally helpful on the subject of decision-making, a matter that many men struggle with, as the introduction noted. Many of us are good at analyzing. Fewer of us are good at deciding.

We can trace this failure rate to laziness, a fear of mistakes, and improper notions of guidance. Chanski tackles this collective attitude in his chapter on providence when he writes,

In decision-making we must not adopt an unscriptural, mystical model that results in our passively permitting ourselves to be pushed around by our environment—like a four-ball. Instead, in circumstances where we are biblically allowed and authorized to press forward, let us humbly, prayerfully, and aggressively seek to do the pushing around (96).

These words are helpful for all men today, but they may be particularly helpful for pastors. Chanski reminds all Christian men, pastors included, to make decisions and shoulder the consequences, good or bad, that come. When pastors live out these words, they create a culture of courage in their church and provide a model of leadership that commands respect and promises emulation. This, not passivity or fear, accords with the biblical testimony on this subject: "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim 1:7).

## Shepherding Wives

Here's how Chanski diagnoses the marital temperature of many homes:

The constant imbibing of *feminism*, mixing together with man's native sinfulness, has resulted in an epidemic of passive-purple-fourballism in modern marriages. Men have permitted themselves to be emasculated into a company of wimp eunuchs, who believe it should be their goal to strive toward being *passive nice guys* in their homes (167).

That's spot-on. My generation was raised with men like Steve Martin's character in *Father of the Bride* as role models. Martin's character was more of a clueless baby than a manly man. This model of masculinity, repeated many times over in the culture, has transferred to many Christian homes today.

To counter this trend, Chanski urges, "We've got to reject modern thinking and take up biblical thinking. Without apology, the Scriptures teach that the man is to be the leader in his marriage and in his home. *Husbanding* is a crucial endeavor requiring manly dominion" (168). How important these words are for the pastor seeking to instill a biblical understanding of marriage amidst a culture where men were taught either to be distant and solemn (as in the 50s and 60s) or silly and weak (as in the 70s onward). Chanski's words will help pastors to teach the men of their churches to reject laziness and to take action to care spiritually and otherwise for their wives and children.

## Concluding Words

*Manly Dominion* is excellent, though I did find three minor flaws. First, Chanski frequently uses what one might call "the language of Zion." One example: "With those heavy millstones of sins tied around your neck, you're doomed to split hell wide open" (159). Talk of "millstones" and "doom" is a bit dramatic and dated. Better to tone the rhetoric down a bit and aim for clearer communication.

Second, I would have appreciated a section on how men should begin romance. He has one for dads and one for husbands, but not one for young men who need to hear his dominion message applied to the pursuit of marriage.

Third, the title is a little strange. Granted, it is memorable, but one wonders whether Chanski might have come up with a metaphor for passive manliness that is more easily understood. What is a "passive purple four ball" anyway?

These minor quibbles aside, Chanski's *Manly Dominion* is superb. It will train the godly men of today to raise the godly men of tomorrow. Whether over a choice of socks, choice of ministry, or choice of spouse, may our sons soon rise up and say, "We are a generation of godly men raised by men of courage."

*The vigorously masculine Owen Strachan is a master of divinity student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He also works as an editorial assistant in the office of seminary president R. Albert Mohler.*

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