

# Building Biblical Theology

LESSON  
ONE

## WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?



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# Building Biblical Theology

## Lesson One

### What is Biblical Theology?

#### INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

#### ORIENTATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

## ACTS OF GOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION**

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

### **Factual Historical Analysis**

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

### **Theological Historical Analysis**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## DEVELOPMENTS

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

### CULTURAL CHANGES

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



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

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

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

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

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

## THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES

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

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

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

## Critical Biblical Theology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Evangelical Developments

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## HISTORY AND REVELATION

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

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

### ACT AND WORD

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

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

## Act Revelation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## Word Revelation

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Interconnections

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CONTOURS

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

### Goal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Rising and Falling**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Organic Development

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CONCLUSION

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

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

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