

PREACHING THE WHOLE BIBLE  
AS CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

# Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture

*The Application of Biblical Theology  
to Expository Preaching*

Graeme Goldsworthy

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

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Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.  
2140 Oak Industrial Drive N.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49505 /  
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.  
www.eerdmans.com

Printed in the United States of America

12 11 10 09 08 07      12 11 10 9 8 7

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Goldsworthy, Graeme.  
Preaching the whole Bible as Christian scripture: the application of biblical  
theology to expository preaching / Graeme Goldsworthy.

p.      cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and indexes.

ISBN 978-0-8028-4730-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Bible — Homiletical use. 2. Preaching. I. Title.

BS534.5 .G65 2000

251 — dc21

00-035429

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Jesus and the Koala*

#### **The Predictable “Jesus Bit”**

There is a story told about an Australian Sunday School teacher who felt that her approach to teaching was in need of some remedial action. She thought she was altogether too predictable and the children were becoming bored with her story-telling and questioning of the class about what they had learned. She decided on a new tack to try to rectify matters. The next Sunday, once the preliminaries were over, she stood before the class of five-year-olds and asked, “Who can tell me what is gray and furry and lives in a Gum tree<sup>1</sup>?” The children were completely taken by surprise by this totally unexpected and new approach. They thought there must be a catch and stared blankly at the teacher. “Come on,” she coaxed, “someone must know. What is gray, furry, lives in a Gum tree — has a black leathery nose and beady eyes?” Still no answer. “Oh, surely you know.” She was nonplussed by this reticence. “It lives in a Gum tree; eats Gum leaves; it has big beady eyes and furry ears.” Silence. She was about to switch tactics and to go on to something else when a small girl gradually raised her hand in the air with much hesitation. Delighted, the teacher asked, “Yes, Suzie?” The child replied, “I know it’s Jesus, but it sounds like a Koala!”

Such predictability is, hopefully, a bit of a caricature. Yet, at a more sophisticated level it can exist. Some of the students that I teach at Moore Theological College discussed their concerns with me about listening to preachers who deal with the Old Testament in such a way that the students were moved to think, in the course of the sermon, “Ho hum! now here comes the Jesus bit.” These preachers were attempting to avoid an exposition of the

1. The common name for any variety of the eucalypts.

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Old Testament without Christ, which so often leads to a moralizing approach. Obviously a preacher needs to have a clear sense of the relationship of Old Testament texts to the person and work of Jesus, but that preacher also needs to be able to communicate this relationship in ways that avoid such stereotyping. It is also obvious that something is very wrong if the preacher's way of relating the text to Jesus is felt to be boring and predictable.

### **Problems with the Old Testament**

My original intention was to deal with the thorny subject of preaching from the Old Testament. There is no doubt in my mind, and clearly in the minds of many, that preaching from the Old Testament presents many problems for the Christian preacher. Having taught Old Testament for a number of years in two theological colleges and a Bible college, I have found that people expect me to be both motivated and experienced in preaching from the Old Testament. Yet, in all the years I have spent in full-time pastoral ministry, I have found a need to be very disciplined in planning a preaching program to include the Old Testament on a regular basis. It is plainly easier as a Christian to preach from the New Testament than from the Old. Some may feel that preaching from the Old Testament is the same in principle as preaching from the New. Of course, if we are diligent in the choice of our texts, that may well appear to be the case. But even at the level of ethical teaching in the prophets, or the praise of God in the Psalms, we instinctively recognize that the material still emanates from the period before Jesus came into the world. How much more, then, is the gap obvious when we deal with some ceremonial prescriptions in the law of Moses.

### **The Separation of the Testaments**

However, other considerations lead me to take up a more general approach to preaching and biblical theology. The first of these is that the separation of biblical studies and biblical theology into the two specialized areas of Old Testament and New Testament, however necessary at the formal and academic level, has led to an extremely costly separation of the Testaments. There are obvious distinctions between the Testaments that make such separation seem logical and even necessary. But the Christian Church has received one canon of Scripture and has always recognized both the distinctions between the Testaments and their essential unity. This particular

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problem has many expressions, but we need note only two. First, in academic curricula established in theological and Bible colleges the division between the Testaments tends to be fairly rigidly maintained. This has repercussions for the way pastors preach and teach, and for the kind of role models they create for their lay preachers and teachers. Furthermore, while the study of the New Testament will inevitably raise questions of the use of the Old Testament in the New, the study of the Old Testament is easily carried on in total isolation from the questions of how this significant body of literature should function as Christian Scripture. Second, in the field of theological writing we notice two major characteristics of literature related to the concern of this study. Biblical theologies are almost entirely either theologies of the Old Testament or theologies of the New Testament. Very few writers have attempted to write a theology of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> In addition, commentaries on the Old Testament rarely take up the question of the Christian significance of the Old Testament text. Even some series of Old Testament commentaries emanating from evangelical publishers tend to be very coy about raising the questions about how the texts can be related to the concerns that might figure in a Sunday sermon. Perhaps it could be said with some justification that the question of Christian application is not the concern of commentaries. Unfortunately it does not appear to be the concern of any other major body of literature either.

## Problems with the New Testament

There is another related problem that affects the way we deal with the New Testament, a problem that also exists for the preacher of texts from both Testaments. Its specifics may differ because of the distinctions between the two Testaments, but the nature of the problem is the same: What is the relationship of this text to the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth? Let me be a little more specific. Preachers with a concern for expository preaching are predisposed to developing a preaching program in which a series of expositions from one particular book is given. In my experience the preaching of a series of sermons, say, from an epistle, easily leads the preacher to fragmentation because, while the epistle was written as a single letter to be read at one time,

2. More academically oriented scholarship tends to regard the task too large for one person to attempt to write a theology of the whole Bible. Some theologians seem to be driven by a sense of the overwhelming distinctions between the Testaments and to regard the task as impossible. One exception is the work of Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London: SCM, 1992). Evangelical writers have been less inhibited about the task, but also have tended to produce works that are more oriented to the nontechnical reader.



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it is often divided up so that it is dealt with in Sunday sermons over a period of several weeks. There is nothing wrong with that as such, provided we recognize the changed dynamics. Thus, Paul may expound the gospel in the first part of the letter, and then go on to spell out some ethical and pastoral implications. When the preacher finally gets to deal with the latter, it is possibly a couple of weeks or more since the gospel exposition has happened, and the connection between the gospel and behavior, very closely related in the epistle, can be lost. The result is that the exhortations and commands are no longer seen to arise out of the good news of God's grace in the gospel but as simple imperatives of Christian behavior; as naked law.<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between what is and what ought to be, that is, the relationship between the finished work of Christ and the task of the believers, is often well flagged in the text. Paul, for example, frequently indicates the relationship by using the word "therefore" or a similar indicator of consequence. If we were to preach a series on Philippians, an obvious unit for one sermon would be the servant passage in Philippians 2:1-11 in which the saving work of Christ for us is clearly expounded. The following Sunday might feature the next part of the chapter, say vv. 12-18. How easy it is to ignore the "therefore" and to see the injunctions and exhortations of this passage as standing alone and not, as Paul expounds them, as the implications of the grace of God in Christ.<sup>4</sup> A regular attender who is fairly well informed may make the connection. But a newcomer, or someone who missed the previous Sunday, could gain the impression that the essence of Christianity is a matter of keeping the rules.

There are also broader questions of the relationship of the modern Christian to the contents of the ancient text. Does a saying of Jesus, for example, the Sermon on the Mount, have enduring significance as a direct word to Christians today? What are the interpretative matters that face us in the four Gospels, which relate a situation that no longer exists, namely, Jesus' presence in the flesh? Or again, in what way can the narrative material in Acts be the norm for the life of the modern church? A description of an event involving the apostles or the primitive church does not necessarily stand as the pattern for all time. We recognize the existence of elements of discontinuity between us and the Old Testament, but we do not so readily recognize those that exist between us and the New Testament.

3. I will consider the way Old Testament law is shaped by the grace of God in chapter 11.

4. As the saying goes, "When we see a *therefore*, we should ask what it is there for."

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### **Every One Is an Interpreter: Every One Should Be a Biblical Theologian**

These are some of the issues that the preacher faces, like it or not. They can not be avoided on the grounds of a simplistic assertion about the clarity of Scripture. The preacher is an interpreter of Scripture, as is every Christian who reads the Bible and seeks to make sense of its application to our daily lives. There are some basic principles that stem from the nature of the Bible that we need to be clear about. We also recognize that our assessment of the nature of the Bible involves certain basic assumptions or presuppositions that should be owned. It is vital for us to remember that our reference point is Jesus of Nazareth as he is testified to by Holy Scripture. The apostolic testimony to him shapes our approach to the Bible as a whole. This testimony necessitates the self-conscious formation of a biblical-theological approach to the unity and diversity of the Bible.

In this study, I approach the subject with certain presuppositions that were initially shaped by my conversion as a teenager under an evangelical ministry, and by my theological training at Moore Theological College. Graduate theological studies at the University of Cambridge and at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia forced me to examine carefully my presuppositions and my reasons for holding to them. Some of my earlier assumptions have undergone a measure of modification as I have gained what I think is a better grasp of the overall message of the Bible. Notwithstanding the need to mature, I have, for better or worse, come to the conviction that the position of traditional historical Christianity is the most consistent.<sup>5</sup> My position is one of reformed and evangelical theology.<sup>6</sup> On this basis I seek to establish my biblical theology as a primary hermeneutic tool for understanding the significance of the biblical text and as a vital expository tool for preaching. While I think it important to make clear my own presuppositions, I do not thereby imply that the matters raised in this book are relevant only to those who agree in every detail with my presuppositions. It is my hope that any preacher or teacher who wants to expound the Scriptures as the word of God will find encouragement in these pages for that most noble task.

5. I have raised the subject of presuppositions in my book *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Leicester: IVP, 1991) and in “‘Thus Says the Lord,’ the Dogmatic Basis of Biblical Theology,” in *God Who Is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to Dr. D. B. Knox*, ed. P. T. O’Brien and D. G. Peterson (Homebush West, Sydney: Lancer, 1986). The subject is ably dealt with by Carl F. H. Henry, *Toward a Recovery of Christian Belief* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990).

6. I hope thus to remain consistent with the position of Christian theism.

## CHAPTER 1

# *Nothing but Christ and Him Crucified*

### **The Preacher's Dilemma**

Evangelical preachers have an agenda. We want to proclaim Christ in the most effective way possible. We want to see people converted and established in the Christian life on the surest foundation — the word of God. We want to see people grow in their spiritual understanding and in godliness. We want to see churches grow, mature, and serve the world by reaching out to it with the gospel and with works of compassion. We want to impact our local communities through evangelism and ministries of caring. We want to strengthen our families and to nurture the children in the gospel. And at the heart of this agenda is the conviction that God has charged us with the ministry of preaching and teaching the Bible as a prime means of achieving these goals. Evangelical preachers stand in a long and venerable tradition going back to the apostles. It is a tradition of the centrality of the preached word in the life of the Christian congregation. We believe that preaching is not some peripheral item in the program of the local church, but that it lies at the very heart of what it is to be the people of God. We understand the activity of preaching as the primary way in which the congregations of God's people express their submission to his word. Of course the sermon in the church service is not the only way that the word of God comes to us. We encourage people to study the Bible in the privacy of their homes, to attend small group Bible studies, and even to undertake some more formal training in Bible and theology. But none of these things, important as they are, should detract from the primacy of preaching. In chapter 4 I will consider the question of the essential nature of preaching.

What did Paul mean when he wrote 1 Corinthians 2:2, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified"? It is clear

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that he wrote in all his epistles about a great deal more than the death of Jesus Christ. It is also clear that the main subject of all his writings is the person and work of Jesus. Yet he also writes about matters concerning his personal life and the lives of his fellow Christians. This particular passage in 1 Corinthians is a useful place to start our investigation, for in it Paul repudiates the worldview of the pagan, the philosopher, and even the Jew who attempts to get a handle on reality apart from the truth that is in Christ. “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23-24). The reason for this Christ-centeredness is so that the faith of his readers “might not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:5). This means that the only appropriate way to respond to God’s revealed power and wisdom is by being focused on the person of Christ. Elsewhere Paul defines the power of God as Christ and his gospel.<sup>1</sup> We will need, therefore, to take up the question later in this study of what the gospel is.<sup>2</sup>

The problem we face as preachers is not a new one. Throughout the ages Christian preachers have struggled with the question of the centrality of Christ and how this affects the way we handle the text of the Bible. It is an obvious problem for the preaching of the Old Testament, but, in a more subtle way, it also exists for the preacher of the New Testament. If a passage is not directly about the gospel events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to what extent are we obliged to make the connection? Would Paul really have us preach sermons in which we end up making the same platitudinous remarks about Jesus dying for our sins? Can the Old Testament speak to us from within itself and without any attempt being made to connect it to the gospel?

There is no doubt that many Christian preachers, in effect, do preach from the Old Testament about God in the Psalms, or the life of faith exhibited by one or other of the heroes of Israel, without connecting it specifically to the person and work of Christ. Furthermore, it is not only in the more academic books of theology or biblical studies that the Old Testament is dealt with in isolation from the New. Many books and inductive Bible study guides are written specifically to edify Christians from the Old Testament but without any explicit Christian content. A number of factors seem to be at work here, particularly among evangelical writers. There is, first, the correct assumption that the Old Testament is Christian Scripture and that, despite the difficulties in doing so, it must be appropriated for Christian people. Second, there is the recognition that the people of the Old Testament believed in the same God that we as Christians acknowledge. But then there is also the questionable assumption that the peo-

1. 1 Cor. 1:17, 24; Rom. 1:16.

2. See chapters 6 and 7.

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ple of the Old Testament primarily function to provide patterns of faith and behavior for us to imitate or, conversely, to avoid.

There is often a failure to think through how the link between the people and events of the Old Testament are to be made with us as, presumably, New Testament people. This failure leads to some major defects in preaching, not the least of which is the tendency to moralize on Old Testament events, or simply to find pious examples to imitate. But, as Edmund Clowney puts it,

preaching which ignores the *historia revelationis*, which “again and again equates Abraham and us, Moses’ struggle and ours, Peter’s denial and our unfaithfulness; which proceeds only illustratively, does not bring the Word of God and does not permit the church to see the glory of the work of God; it only preaches man, the sinful, the sought, the redeemed, the pious man, but not Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Clowney also rightly points out that we have to be very selective in the way we find examples to follow in the Old Testament saints.<sup>4</sup> After all, we know how the Old Testament has always been an embarrassment to some because much of what are regarded as pious deeds in ancient Israel would simply not pass muster today. This raises the related issue of moral problems in the Bible. The Old Testament is the source of many such moral problems for those who would treat it seriously. Death and destruction, slaughter and pillage, are standard fare in the narratives of Israel’s conquest of Canaan. What do we learn from such situations? If the narratives of Elijah teach us to “walk close to the Lord” as I heard one speaker put it, what are the implications for this walk with God of Elijah’s command to slay all the prophets of Baal? Most of us have worked out some way around these moral dilemmas created by the Old Testament. An evangelical is not likely to feel at home with the assessment of old liberalism that the Old Testament depicts a primitive and, therefore, substandard form of religion. But, the problem remains. What, for example, can we say about the imprecations of Psalm 137, which are approving of those who take Babylonian babies and dash them against a rock!<sup>5</sup>

3. Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (London: Tyndale Press, 1962; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 78, n. 9, quoting from Karl Dijk, *De Dienst der Prediking* (1955), p. 109.

4. Clowney, *Preaching*, pp. 79-82.

5. Ps. 137:9. In the metrical version of Ps. 137, the Christian Reformed Church has managed to soften the blow by making it more impersonal:

God give you evil for reward,  
Blest be the one who brings your fall,  
Babylon great — your seed be smashed!  
Vengeance shall come from God our Lord.

*Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987)

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Inductive Bible study books<sup>6</sup> are a prime source of the problem, not because there is anything wrong with applying this technique to the study of the Bible as such, but because this method alone is insufficient. If we give a group of Christians the task of reading a portion of the Old Testament in conjunction with some prescribed questions aimed at getting them to look carefully at the text in order to be able to understand what is being said, this is good as far as it goes. But the technique either makes enormous assumptions about the ability of people to see how this portion of text actually fits into the total unity of Scripture and, thus, how it relates to Christ, or else ignores the necessity to do so. Many people would not find that a problem. Parallels between the people of the Old Testament and ourselves are all that some readers need to be able to feel deeply that this is the word of God to us today. I have to say that I do find it a problem, not because I am uninterested in what the Bible has to say to us, but precisely because I am interested. The burning question is whether the predominant attention given to the examples of faith and unbelief in the Bible is really focusing on what God primarily is wanting to say to us.

The point can be illustrated from a more obvious area of biblical teaching. It is quite clear that the New Testament shows us that the person of Jesus Christ is worthy of imitating. In fact the imitation of Christ is an important dimension in the teaching about the Christian disciple's existence. Yet, most Christians would understand that the imitation of Christ is not the center of the teaching of the New Testament. We are saved and made into the image of Christ not by our efforts to imitate him. Such an idea reduces the gospel to ethical effort. We recognize that the gospel tells us of the absolutely unique work of Christ, both in his living and his dying, by which we are saved through faith. We cannot imitate or live the gospel event as such. We can only believe it. We cannot work our way to heaven by moral endeavor. We can only depend on the finished work of Christ for us. We cannot command other people to live or do the gospel. We must proclaim the message of what God has done for them in Christ. We follow the New Testament in calling on people to live out the implications of the gospel, but we cannot urge people to actually live the gospel, for that was the unique work of Christ. This distinction between the gospel and its fruit in our lives is crucial. If we reject the notions of liberal Christianity that reduced the work of Jesus to ethical example, the implications are far-reaching for the way we handle the Bible. It is clear from the New Testament that the ethical example of Christ is secondary to and dependent upon the primary and unique work of Christ for us. Yet this does not seem to be clear to many when it

6. By which I refer to the many series of studies available that use the inductive method (i.e., moving from the particular text to a general application). The portion of text is read and considered for the specific information it can yield. From this the applications are generalized to the reader and to all Christians. Frequently the approach is to pose a number of questions calculated to get the reader to think analytically about the portion of the Bible text.

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comes to the Old Testament. The message of the Old Testament is too easily reduced to the imitation of godly example and the avoidance of the ungodly example. This raises the questions of the nature of the Bible's unity, the relationship of the Testaments. To these we must turn later.

## **The Centrality of the Gospel**

The central message of the New Testament concerns God incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, who did for us what we could not do for ourselves, in order to bring us, a lost people, back to God. The whole of Scripture is filled with the sense of the divine initiative in salvation. In the Old Testament the sin of Adam and Eve, which brings the judgment of God, is not the end of the story because God has a plan of mercy and grace. The narratives of Noah and Abraham are eloquent of the sovereign work of God to bring rebellious humanity back from the brink of destruction. The covenant of God made with a chosen people is before all else a covenant of grace. God elects his people, makes significant promises to them, and acts to bring about the fulfillment of these promises. Only after the great redemptive act in the exodus from Egypt is Israel given the code of conduct in the law of Sinai: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exod. 20:2). They are already his people through what he has done in the past. They could not save themselves from Egypt and from their bondage to foreign gods; they could only stand still and see the salvation that God would achieve for them (Exod. 14:13-14). Then, having been saved by grace, they are bonded to their God in the covenant of Sinai. This primacy of grace, which is at work all the way through the Old Testament, points us to the centrality and primacy of the gospel of grace in the New Testament.

The nature of the relationship between the salvation revealed in the Old Testament and the gospel of Jesus Christ is something that we strive to understand on the basis of our biblical theology. This is not an easy task, and it is one that is readily shelved in favor of a more platitudinous and moralizing approach to the meaning of the Old Testament for us. The consistently Christian and biblical approach is to start with the New Testament and, specifically, with the gospel.

First, the gospel is central to our thinking in an experiential sense. Through the gospel we are brought to acknowledge the lordship of Christ, our need, and his grace to save all who believe in him. We may have had a lot of information about the contents of the Bible, and even have entertained sincerely religious thoughts before we believed the gospel. But the gospel is our means of contact with the truth about God. Indeed, the message about Christ

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is the point of turning. Conversion, whether gradual or sudden, is a turning from a worldview and personal commitment in which we ourselves are at the center. For the secular mind, conversion is the point when all facts in our universe cease to be marshaled against the God of the Bible and are seen to testify to his reality. The gospel is the starting point for our eternal life with God. It is the means of becoming reconciled to God so that we have assurance of God's favor and of the gift of eternal life. It is the means by which we are born again and know the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the gospel is central theologically. Though we have already touched upon the matter, we must never forget that, in both Testaments, what the people of God are called upon to do is always based upon what has already been done. Jesus is presented in the New Testament as the one who fulfills the promises of God by achieving for humankind the salvation that is otherwise beyond our reach. Against the backdrop of the complexity of the history and prophetic expectations of the Old Testament, Jesus proclaims himself to be the goal of all the purposes and promises of God. Where the Old Testament describes the goal of God's work in terms of a remnant of the chosen people, the promised land, the temple, the Davidic prince, and a whole range of images and metaphors, the New Testament claims simply that the death and resurrection of Jesus fulfills them all. The mighty acts of God, interpreted by his prophetic word, and by which he revealed his nature, are declared by the preaching of Jesus and his apostles to be preparatory for the person and work of Jesus. The God who acts in the Old Testament is the God who becomes flesh in the New Testament in order to achieve the definitive saving work in the world.

At the heart of this saving work is not the ethical teachings of Jesus, but his obedient life and death, his glorious resurrection and his ascension to the right hand of God on high. In a remarkable way the resurrection is portrayed as the event that encapsulates and fulfills all the theological themes of the Old Testament. This is not in any sense to denigrate the ethical dimension. The Bible shows us that God is lawful and that the freedom we have in Christ is not lawlessness. It is a matter of perspective, as I will say in a number of ways in this study. So often distortions of Christianity come about not by introducing totally foreign elements but by getting certain elements that are manifestly biblical out of perspective. The ethics of the Bible are put out of perspective when they are given exclusive or prior claim over the grace of God. To put it another way, the gift of God is always prior to and the basis of the task we are given, to live godly lives.

7. This is not the place for a discussion about whether faith or regeneration comes first. I suspect some of the arguments about this are misplaced. It is true that the sinner, being dead in trespasses and sins, cannot turn of his own accord to believe the gospel without the grace of the Holy Spirit. It is also true that the New Testament teaches that the word and Spirit go together.



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## **Preaching and Biblical Theology**

In the course of writing this book I have consulted a wide range of books on preaching. A survey of the history of preaching would show us that the nature of preaching has undergone many changes. The place and nature of the sermon have, from time to time, been under attack from various quarters and in different ways. Most preachers today will have access to the contemporary literature, but few would have the inclination or the resources to examine the development of preaching over the centuries. As evangelicals we will have some notion of apostolic preaching drawn from the New Testament. Beyond that, unless we have a special interest in patristics, or medieval preaching, or in some other historical period, we will probably confine our reading and understanding to some of the many available contributions to the literature of our time. My own impression of the modern literature is that it is predominantly weighted towards matters of effective communication and methods of sermon preparation. I find that questions regarding the nature of Scripture, which provide us with the principles of interpretation and application, are not so prominent.

It is here that biblical theology comes into its own. Much of the literature on preaching either ignores biblical theology completely or makes only a passing reference to it. Assumptions are made about the application of the results of careful exegesis, but the principles for making the connection between the ancient text and the contemporary hearers are not always so clearly dealt with. In asserting that biblical theology is the way forward, I am not thereby seeking to ride some hobbyhorse or to provide some brilliant revelation that no one else ever thought of. I am simply saying that the way the Bible presents its message, a message that reaches its climax in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, provides us with the principles we need. Biblical theology is nothing more nor less than allowing the Bible to speak as a whole: as the one word of the one God about the one way of salvation.

In the pages that follow I take up a number of pertinent questions that any evangelical preacher might ask about the assumptions we make, the method we use, and the applications that we can draw in our preparation of expository sermons. By this means I hope to clarify the role of biblical theology, not as an optional extra, but as the heart of the process of bringing the word of God to the contemporary hearer. The last part of the book explores the application of biblical theology to the various genres or characteristic types of material that go to make up the incredible diversity within the unity of the Bible.

**PART 1**

**BASIC QUESTIONS WE ASK ABOUT  
PREACHING AND THE BIBLE**

## CHAPTER 2

### *What Is the Bible?*

#### **Evangelicals Are Bible People**

Much has been written about what makes evangelicals distinctive. The term “evangelical” has become somewhat rubbery and hard to pin down, but it behooves us to try to define it. I would suggest that the bottom line in the definition is this: an evangelical is one who maintains adherence to the conviction of the final authority of the Bible as God’s word written. We can also define an evangelical by stating qualifications to certain emphases: an evangelical values the traditions of the Church but subordinates them to the Bible. An evangelical believes in the gift of human reason but understands it to be subject to the ultimate truth revealed by God, who alone determines what is reasonable. An evangelical believes in the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in the believer but asserts that the Spirit does not work apart from or against the word of the Bible. Thus, an evangelical repudiates the oft-stated belief that Christians have a threefold authority: Scripture, tradition, and reason. This belief is rejected because it is as unworkable as it is unrealistic. Furthermore, it is misleading for it suggests that these three authorities are equal. As soon as there is a clash between any of them, one will take over as supreme. Once we accept the supreme authority of Scripture, the importance of tradition and reason are not in question. The importance of tradition for evangelicals can be seen in the strategy of the Reformers who constantly argued their position as the truly catholic one attested to by the church fathers. Evangelicalism, despite the emergence of the self-conscious movement in comparatively recent times, sees itself as authentic, historic, and in that sense traditional, Christianity.

The name “evangelical,” of course, means a gospel person. Because nearly every person of whatever persuasion who claims to be a Christian ap-

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peals to the Bible and the gospel, we have to be more discerning. The gospel needs to be defined as to its content and effects, and the Bible needs to be asserted as to its nature and authority. Evangelicals have often dealt with the latter concern by affirming their sense of the authority of the Bible in terms of its inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy. I do not propose to enter into that discussion here except to say that I understand all these properties to stem from, and to be rightly understood in the light of, the nature of the gospel and the relationship of the Bible to Jesus Christ.

To claim the name “evangelical” does not necessarily mean that we always understand its implications or are consistent in the way we carry them out in our lives or in our preaching. The understanding may be rather unformed and basically negative. This carries the ever-present danger of pharisaism: “I thank God that I am not like these Catholics, Liberals, and Charismatics; I read my Bible every day; I accept only the Bible as my authority.” The conviction may be a “feel-good” thing that somehow relates religious experience to some vague convictions about the Bible being the authority that authenticates this experience. The danger here is that as long as what we do makes us feel good, we are content to accept that it is biblical without necessarily examining the Scriptures to see if it really is. This good feeling may be some undefined inner warmth or simply the recognition that our ministerial strategies are working. People are attending our meetings; many express how they have been helped by the teaching; and so on. One does not want to be critical of fellow evangelicals, but it has to be said that sometimes there is little in common between various groups or individuals who claim the name. It is easy to claim to be biblical, but much harder to translate that into the way we read the Bible and shape our thoughts, lives, and ministries. All of us must be thoughtful and prayerfully vigilant in our endeavors to be biblical.

If we evangelicals are Bible people, then we have to be diligent in working out our understanding of the message of the Bible and of its effects in the way we perceive the world and seek to live in it as God’s people. The main purpose of this chapter is not so much to define evangelicalism as to attempt to understand what evangelical belief implies about the nature of the Bible. As evangelical preachers we will need to work very hard to ensure that the nature of our preaching is truly biblical. Using Bible texts, focusing on biblical characters, or using well-worn clichés that are asserted as biblical are not in themselves a guarantee that our preaching is essentially biblical. My hope is that this study in the application of biblical theology to preaching will assist us to be more biblical in our preaching.

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**The Bible Is the Word of the *One* God**

A basic assumption in the evangelical view of the Bible is that there is one God who has revealed himself to us by his word. Here the supreme authority of God is in view, for he alone is God. This one God is consistent in his character and in his adherence to the truth of which he is the author. There is no room for relativism in evangelical faith because God is God alone. No other scenario could account for the nature of the biblical message. Furthermore, this scenario includes the authority of God as the author of all things. The only thing that relativizes the truth is our sinful repression of it. This is not to suggest that, if sinless, we could understand all truth. But it must be asserted that God has made us able to have knowledge, if not exhaustively, then truly.<sup>1</sup>

We should also remind ourselves of some relevant aspects of the biblical teaching. The one God has made all things, and the evidence of his being is everywhere in creation. The human race was created in the image of God and thus with a knowledge of the fact that every aspect of creation witnesses to the Creator's being and power. Humankind has rebelled against its Creator and suppressed the knowledge of the truth. But, in love and mercy God has acted to redeem a people for himself. The word that he now speaks to the world is a redemptive word, and its authenticity is established by the Spirit of God as he takes from us our rebellious spirit and gives us a heart of faith.

God is one, and his plan of salvation embraces the whole of humankind. There is no place here for the kind of relativism that places all gods and all religions on the same level. The unique character of God rules this out since he is holy and perfect in a way no other supposed deities are. The plan of salvation revealed in the Bible is consistent only with a God who alone is God. It is a comprehensive plan that reflects the unity and uniqueness of God. The preacher who does not have confidence in these teachings cannot preach according to the Bible. In the face of postmodern rejection of absolutes and of the prevailing relativism, we must be bold to assert the oneness of God and the absolute nature of his authority. Truth is absolute and coherent because it is the truth of an absolute and coherent God. Postmodernism and popular relativism are expressions of ideological atheism that must be resisted. The ultimate form of relativism is the theory that the universe has come about by chance rather than by creative design. In such a universe, even knowing, or thinking that we know, is a chance event. Evangelical preaching affirms the worldview of Christian theism. We acknowledge that the universe

1. This distinction between exhaustive and true knowledge is a feature of the epistemology of Christian theism as set out by Cornelius Van Til. One implication is that in heaven we will not know everything, for only God has that kind of exhaustive knowledge.

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is the creation of one God and that it is meaningful and orderly. Only sin and the consequent judgment of God confuse that orderliness.

### **The Bible Is the *One Word* of God**

We have considered the oneness and uniqueness of God as the baseline for our understanding of authority. The Bible has a number of metaphors to thrust home the point, not least that of the potter and the clay.<sup>2</sup> The very notion of author carries with it as a derivative, linguistically and actually, the notion of authority. The supreme Author who has made all things has the authority to rule all things. As we come to consider the word of this one God we recognize the importance given to it in creation and redemption. Why does the Genesis creation account stress that “God said, let there be . . . and there was”? Could not God have (metaphorically) snapped his fingers, or simply thought the idea of creation? Are we here dealing with a primitive anthropomorphic story that conceives of God as human and transfers a human mode of acting to the event? Hardly! You and I don’t make things by saying “Let there be.” We might say “I think I’ll make a stool (or a batch of scones).” But then we get on and do it using our hands and tools to fashion already existing raw materials. The creation account is no anthropomorphic story; it is utterly unique. God speaks a word and the whole universe, including everything in it, comes to be. Everything out of nothing. No raw materials, no tools. Only God and his powerful word. This word becomes central to our understanding of preaching, and we will consider it again when we look at the nature of preaching.

The oneness of the word of God follows from the oneness of God. There are those who would say that Christianity is a Western cultural phenomenon, a curious assertion given its Eastern origins. It is seen to be Western because it was mostly Western Christians who brought the Christian faith into Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Sometimes they did it very badly or insensitively as they gave the impression that Christianity and Western civilization were the same thing. It has to be said that Christianity was indeed a dominant force in the shaping of Western civilization, but there were many other forces behind Western cultural developments that had little or nothing to do with Christianity. These included the corrupt imperialism of the church and the state as well as the secularism born of the Enlightenment.

The postcolonial world has seen a resurgence of self-conscious ethnicity particularly among indigenous peoples of former colonial states. One re-

2. Isa. 29:16; 41:25; 45:9; 64:8; Jer. 18:6, 11; Rom. 9:21.

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sult is that there are many impulses to relativism and syncretism challenging the uniqueness of the gospel and of the teaching of the Bible. But such moves can only succeed if the Bible is not allowed to speak with its own self-authenticating authority as the word of God. Cultural relativism soon develops into ideological and theological relativism. To give an example, on a televised documentary about indigenous Christians in Canada, a tribal Native American who was also a Roman Catholic nun gave the ultimate expression to the relativism that the Second Vatican Council has allowed when she defended the syncretistic mixing of “indigenous spirituality and traditional religious practices” with Catholicism. She explained that if Jesus had been born as one of them (a Native American) instead of as a Jew, Christianity would be very different. There was in this explanation a total lack of the sense of the sovereignty of God in the outworking of salvation in history. There certainly was no place given to the biblical picture of the way God would bring people from all nations into blessing as promised to Abraham. The spirit of Christ, the Jew, was put on the same level as the spirits worshiped by the pre-Christian tribal Native Americans.

The unity of the Bible has been under attack since the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century rejected the notion that God, if such a being existed, had anything to do with the production of the Bible. It was asserted that the Bible consequently must be treated like any other humanly produced book. Historical criticism has radically changed the way people understand the unity of the Bible. With the One Author out of the way, the unity is dissolved, leaving us with a collection of disparate documents only loosely connected ideologically with one another. I am certainly not suggesting that we reject out of hand all the critical methods and their findings, for the incarnation of Jesus reminds us that the word of God is both a divine and a human word. Biblical criticism when rightly pursued is a theological task seeking to understand how the divine and the human relate in the word of the Bible. The problem is not critical study but the unbiblical and humanistic presuppositions that are applied in so much critical assessment of the text.<sup>3</sup>

Countering the deliberate attacks on the unity of the Bible mounted by humanistic criticism is one task that we must undertake. In addition, we must also recognize that the unity of the Bible has suffered by default in the evangelical camp. This is nowhere more clearly evident than in the way the Bible is preached by many evangelicals. Texts are taken out of context; and applications are made without due concern for what the biblical author, which is ultimately the Holy Spirit, is seeking to convey by the text. Problem-centered and topical

3. An excellent treatment of the Enlightenment and the development of the historical-critical method can be found in Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

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preaching become the norm, and character studies treat the heroes and heroines of the Bible as isolated examples of how to live. The old adage about a text without its context being a pretext needs reexamination. It is stating an important truth, but it urges upon us the question of what the context of any text is that stops it from becoming a pretext. The answer is not simple, but the bottom line is undoubtedly that the text is part of one unified word from God. The whole Bible is the context of the text. Practically speaking, this does not mean that we have to laboriously go through the entire biblical story every time we preach. It does mean that we must strive to understand the tried and true Reformation principle of the analogy of Scripture, the truth that Scripture interprets Scripture. The meaning of any text is related to the meaning of all other texts. The thing that makes this task manageable is the principle that I will be at pains to emphasize in this study: that the center and reference point for the meaning of all Scripture is the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God.

While the most destructive aspects of the historical-critical method and its developments have undermined the sense of the unity of Scripture, biblical theology has done much to preserve it. Now it must be recognized that many biblical theologians have taken on board the presuppositions of the Enlightenment, and thus the theology they produce is, from an evangelical perspective, lacking. I will seek to show that a biblical theology consistent with evangelical presuppositions has great explanatory power and preserves the sense of the unity of Scripture while also recognizing the great diversity that is there.

### **The Bible Is the Word of God about the *One Way of Salvation***

Evangelicals are committed to the uniqueness of Christ.<sup>4</sup> We reject the notion that all roads lead to God, for the simple reason that the Bible expressly rejects it. The idea that different cultures should be encouraged to develop their own non-Christian or syncretistic spirituality is quite foreign to the Bible. Religion does not consist in human beings seeking after God, as is popularly stated. Rather the biblical picture is of God's revealed truth being challenged by idolatry. It would appear from Paul's treatment of the subject in Romans 1:18-32 that religion is in fact the ultimate human endeavor to avoid the truth of God that is everywhere evident in us and all around us.

If all religions are thought to lead to God, then there is simply no point

4. See, for example, John McIntosh, "Biblical Exclusivism: Towards a Reformed Approach to the Uniqueness of Christ," *Reformed Theological Review* 53.1 (1994).



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in preaching from the Bible. Such religious relativism is usually accompanied by some form of universalism. This means that the religious views of the atheist who creates a god in his own image are as acceptable as those of the Christian theist. The Christian and the atheist both have the same destiny, and the only possible difference is in the present quality of life that each set of convictions produces. We cannot accept this state of affairs. For some evangelicals there is uncertainty about the fate of those who have never heard the gospel, but this, I suggest, is not simply a matter of opinion but one of assessing the biblical evidence. It is a feature of evangelical faith that eternal destiny is at stake, and it is eternal destiny that gives preaching its urgency. As Bernard Ramm states, “The absolute distinction between saved and lost still governs the thinking and theology of the evangelical.”<sup>5</sup>

Once again it is a biblical-theological perspective that strengthens our conviction of the one way of salvation. Biblical theology should assist us in avoiding the worst kinds of ecumenical and interfaith relativism. But, closer to home, it should energize our preaching with a greater zeal for evangelism and for sound doctrine as the means of establishing people in the faith and leading them to maturity. The great strength of biblical theology is that it uncovers the massive inner coherence of the divine plot in salvation history. This is an aspect of its apologetic strength in the defense of Christianity. The complexity of the interrelationships of biblical themes and doctrines can often elude us when we allow our preaching to become focused on the practical situations and problems in the hope of being known as a relevant preacher. The danger is that relevance becomes a subjective judgment rather than one based on the biblical analysis of things. After all, God is the most qualified to say what is relevant.

Among those features of the biblical way of salvation that stand out as presenting an utterly unique program for the rescue of the world of sinners is the characteristic of divine grace. Religions, along with humanistic altruism, present programs of works and human effort as the means of reaching the desired destiny. Christianity presents a unique picture that is so out of step with the secular way of thinking that it has to be constantly argued and defended even within the pages of Scripture. Abraham is called to leave a world of paganism in order to be the one through whose descendants God intends blessing for all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3). Israel is called out of Egypt so that its thralldom to Egyptian powers can be set aside and so that it may become a nation free to serve the one true and living God. Whenever syncretism or, as it is sometimes called today, interfaith dialogue<sup>6</sup> emerges in the

5. Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage* (Waco: Word, 1973), p. 148.

6. Modern interfaith dialogue that aims at greater understanding of other peoples of different religions is not in question. The religious relativism of some who promote it, however, cannot remain unchallenged.

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life of Israel, it is in direct contravention of the divine ordinances. It inevitably leads to disaster. There is only one way the nations will find God, and that is through the salvation of Israel, which is set to be a light to the nations.

### **The Bible Is the *One Written Word of God* about the Way of Salvation**

God is one and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. So wrote Paul to Timothy in the context of his stated concern for the nations of the world.<sup>7</sup> We have spoken of the oneness of God and of his plan of salvation. Now we need to remind ourselves of the importance of the Bible as the written word of God. We cannot do this without coming to the uniqueness of Jesus as the Word incarnate and the only mediator between God and mankind. The evangelical preacher stands by the conviction that the Bible has a very high dignity. God has spoken to humankind, and he has not left us, who come after, without a witness. The Holy Spirit, the promised Paraclete,<sup>8</sup> has exercised his gracious ministry in such a way that the God-breathed Scriptures have been given to us as the true and faithful record of the way God has spoken and acted in history for our salvation.

This sacred activity of writing down what God has said is not confined to the apostles and New Testament authors. Many critics doubt the traditions about Moses having written the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. Be that as it may, the basis for such a tradition is there in the text itself: Moses was instructed to write certain things down; others were written by the finger of God; and there is a record of Moses having written much more.<sup>9</sup> This precedent was continued by Joshua<sup>10</sup> and the prophets.<sup>11</sup> The same principle emerges in the New Testament. Not only does the record of the earthly life and death of Jesus find expression in a new and unique literary genre, the Gospel, but the majority of the New Testament documents originated as letters written to various Christian churches facing a variety of challenges and needs.

A matter we will have to take up in more detail is the relationship of the Bible to the person of Jesus Christ. The question arises for at least two rea-

7. 1 Tim. 2:5. The context is Paul's exhortation for prayer to be made for everyone. He refers to this principle of the mediatorship of Jesus, which has much wider ramifications than the immediate context.

8. John 14:15-17, 26; 15:26; 16:13-14.

9. Exod. 17:14; 24:4; 34:1, 28; Deut. 4:13; 5:22; 9:10; 10:2, 4; 27:3, 8; 31:9, 19.

10. Josh. 8:32; 24:26.

11. Isa. 30:8; Jer. 30:2; 36:2, 17, 28.

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sons. The first is the recorded conviction of the central character, Jesus, that he himself sums up and fulfills all that has gone before in the Old Testament Scriptures. The second is the common designation given to both Jesus and the Scriptures: the word of God.

Let us for the moment note one of the most important implications of the nature of reality as presented by the Bible. God is there and he is not silent.<sup>12</sup> He has spoken, and he has done so in a way that both reflects reality and is understandable by human beings as thinking, reasoning creatures. Whereas modern thinkers asked what the meaning of a text was, postmodern thinkers question whether a text has any meaning at all.<sup>13</sup> The evangelical preacher must accept that a text has meaning because meaning is established by the Creator of all things and he has communicated with us on the basis that he determines meaning and that we are creatures who are able to receive his communication. The question of our sinful repression of this communicated truth is dealt with in the Bible, as is the redemptive solution involving the gospel, which is applied to us by the Holy Spirit. God has shone into our darkness with the light of Christ. On this basis we preach with confidence that God's gospel is powerful and the Spirit is active to apply it.

### **The Bible Is Therefore a Book about Christ**

It does not take much to demonstrate that the New Testament documents all focus in various ways on Jesus of Nazareth in his life, death, and resurrection. When the historical events as such are not the emphasis, they are the presupposition for the concern for doctrine and the nature of Christian existence. No New Testament document makes sense apart from the central affirmation that Jesus Christ has come among us as the bringer of salvation. Though a composite of twenty-seven distinct documents, the New Testament is unified as a book about Jesus who is the Savior who came to live, die, and rise again; who comes among his people now through his word and Spirit; and who will come again in great glory to judge the living and the dead.

As simple as it is to state this central fact about the New Testament, the

12. This reflects the title of an important book by Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), which deals with the reason why we can be confident that we can know what is real and true.

13. A comprehensive treatment of the subject by an evangelical scholar is to be found in Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). See also a defense of biblical realism in Royce Gruenler, *Meaning and Understanding*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).

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practicalities, as I have already indicated, are sometimes much harder to implement. There are important, and sometimes quite complex, matters of interpretation of New Testament texts that will be the subject of more intense scrutiny in the second part of this book.<sup>14</sup> One aspect of such misuse that should concern us all is the propensity we have to separate the matters of ethics and godly living from their roots in the gospel. To give a couple of examples of what I mean I refer to sermons I have listened to in church. The first example involved a series on “the marks of the mature church.” From memory, there was nothing unbiblical in the exegesis of the texts, but it was the overall focus and the implication of it that disturbed me. Various qualities were set forth as what one should expect to find in the truly mature church. It was like describing what a healthy oak tree should be. The implication was that we as a congregation needed to be more diligent in producing these marks of maturity. What was missing was the way these texts belonged in the New Testament context of the exposition of the gospel. The primary focus became law, not gospel. To take up the oak tree analogy again, describing a healthy tree doesn’t help us grow one, it only enables us to recognize one if we should see it. To grow one we need to know about the soil, the seed, and the forces that actually produce such a tree. Without the gospel all the exhortations of the New Testament become not just law, but legalistic.

The second example involved a sermon I heard on the exhortations to fathers in Ephesians 6:4. The theme was specifically Christian fatherhood. Again there was a careful exegesis of the immediate text, and the points raised were pertinent. But there were two things missing. First, it was not made clear that what Paul was saying was an implication of his prior exposition of the gospel. Second, and as a result, there was no comfort in it for fathers who realized that they had failed to live up to this high standard — no grace for failed fathers. Good exegesis of a limited text without its wider context turned the text into law without any visible grace.

When it comes to the Old Testament the task is even more challenging. At this point I want only to emphasize a basic principle that will be examined later in more detail. It needs to be stressed, contemplated, worried through, analyzed, and acted upon if we want our preaching from the Old Testament to be Christian. The principle is simply this: Jesus says that the Old Testament is a book about him. In my introduction I referred to the problem of the predictability of the “Jesus bit” when we try to do the right thing and make Old Testament sermons explicitly Christian. Let me put it another way. Jesus said to the crowds that witnessed his healing of a lame man, “You search the

14. The ease with which cults have misread the Bible is dealt with in James W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1980). A more recent treatment of commonly practiced fallacies in preaching is found in Donald A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

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scriptures (the Old Testament) because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify of me. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40). And again, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me” (John 5:46). Luke records for us the extraordinary claim of the risen Christ that he is the subject of all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27, 44-45). These passages along with a much broader range of evidence point us to the essential relationship of all biblical texts to the central theme: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the savior of the world.

To the evangelical preacher, then, I would address one simple but pointed question, a question every one of us should ask ourselves as we prepare to preach (and certainly the answer should be crystal clear in our minds before we get up to preach): How does this passage of Scripture, and consequently my sermon, testify to Christ? There are two main grounds for this question. The first, as stated above, is that Jesus claims to be the subject of all Scripture. The second is the overall structure of biblical revelation, which finds its coherence only in the person and work of Christ. To these we could add a third: it is no accident that the Christian Church has come to understand the Bible to be the word of God, while at the same time acknowledging that this title also belongs to Jesus (John 1:1-14).

Given these considerations of the nature of the Bible, I can think of no more challenging question for the preacher’s self-evaluation than to ask whether the sermon was a faithful exposition of the way the text testifies to Christ.

## CHAPTER 3

# *What Is Biblical Theology?*

### **Getting the Big Picture**

Geerhardus Vos defines biblical theology as “that branch of exegetical theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> He stresses the fact that God’s revelation is embedded in history and involves a historic progressiveness. This is the basis of a truly evangelical biblical theology. What, then, does the term “biblical theology” convey? From the evangelical preacher’s point of view, biblical theology involves the quest for the big picture, or the overview, of biblical revelation. It is of the nature of biblical revelation that it tells a story rather than sets out timeless principles in abstract. It does contain many timeless principles, but not in abstract. They are given in an historical context of progressive revelation. If we allow the Bible to tell its own story, we find a coherent and meaningful whole. To understand this meaningful whole we have to allow the Bible to stand as it is: a remarkable complexity yet a brilliant unity, which tells the story of the creation and the saving plan of God. Preaching, to be true to God’s plan and purpose, should constantly call people back to this perspective. If God has given us a single picture of reality, albeit full of texture and variety, a picture spanning the ages, then our preaching must reflect the reality that is thus presented.

One aspect of this that causes contention even among evangelicals is the matter of the nature of the unity of the Bible. The influence of the Enlightenment on biblical criticism has sometimes rubbed off on those who claim an evangelical position. An empiricist approach is adopted in that the

1. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), p. 13.