

Expositional Preaching and Theology

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Introduction

THEOLOGY. Just the sound of the syllables elicits from some Christians a cringe of visceral disdain. "Surely you don't mean to parrot the primacy of your theological niceties when real people are starving in Somalia?" The more garden variety response, however, seems to be a glazed look of incredulity from eyes that have developed decided predilections for image and experience over word and text. "Why read the Book when I can watch the movie?" With these and other such "constructive" criticisms, the budding church leader is dismissed back to the methodological drawing board to sketch a paradigm for ministry that evinces more convincing cultural awareness and more persuasive societal savvy.

Perhaps the only other word in Christian use subject to comparable deprecation is doctrine. For many today there are few concepts that cause them to writhe with similar acerbic upheaval. At best, doctrines divide; at worst, they destroy. So we are conditioned to think by an ironically vacuous culture intoxicated by eclectic concoctions of multiple worldviews.

So what is biblical theology? And what's so important about it that a few churchholic cranks decided to give it its own web page? Can we really understand it and agree on it in the local church, and if so, how? What are the major topographical contours that can give us a lay of the land, and what are some land marks that might let us know where we are and if we've overstepped the boundaries of Christian belief? What place should biblical theology occupy in the local church, and, once there, how should it function? Come on in - we'll give you the dime tour. We won't be able to answer all your questions - we still have a bunch of our own to ask.

But if you consider yourself a confessing evangelical concerned about the unity and purity of the church, then kicking around this site might be helpful in discovering what exactly it is that we are called to unite around.

What do You Mean by Biblical Theology?

By biblical theology, we simply mean the main lines of the Bible's great story: What is God like? Are people basically good or bad? What did Jesus do by dying on the cross?

Biblical theology differs from systematic theology in that the former traces developing themes historically, whereas the latter investigates discrete topics logically.

The operating assumptions for biblical theology are therefore that the main theological lines of Scripture's story are discernable, and that we are called by God to learn, teach, and apply them in our churches.

These assumptions are so essential to the fabric of Christianity that, if we refuse to grant them, we call into question the functional validity of God's self-revelation, and we replace the authority of God's Word with our own finite and fallen reason.

Some of the more unpopular biblical doctrines (divine sovereignty, election) are often either explained away so as to remove all inherent offensiveness, or ignored all together by many pastors, thus obscuring the Bible's clarity in the eyes of God's people.

When we obscure the Bible's clarity in this way, we erode the confidence of budding Christians in their own Spirit-given capability to profit from Scripture by themselves.

This corporate erosion of the confidence of God's people in the clarity of God's Word weakens the local church by weakening the community's faith in the life-giving, sanctifying power of God's Word.

Obscuring Scripture's clarity through the attempted removal of its inherent offensiveness also blurs the intentionally distinct lines between the theology of the evangelical church and the various theologies of the world.

So in asking whether our theology is biblical, we're really asking whether the theology we teach either clarifies or obscures the plain meaning of Scripture for the people of God.

We're also asking whether the theology we teach helps distinguish the true gospel from other popular but less faithful teaching ([Gal 1:6-9](#)).

When pastors explain away or ignore some of the Bible's less popular doctrines, the church's fidelity to Scripture is at least partially compromised.

So in asking whether our theology is biblical, we're also asking whether or not our perception and proclamation of the main lines of the biblical story are faithful to what the Bible actually and objectively teaches, especially on unpopular doctrines.

Martin Luther said that if we preach everything but that one point of doctrine which in our time and culture is unpopular, we flee from the very battle we are called to fight.

Biblical Background for Biblical Theology

Sound Proof

When the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus, he mentioned the importance of sound doctrine. By "sound", Paul simply means reliable, accurate, and faithful.

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing (1 Tim 6:3).

What you have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you - guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us (2 Tim 1:13-14).

He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:9). Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth (Titus 1:13).

Sound Booth

What these verses intimate is that even as early as Paul's lifetime, there was an objective, agreed-upon body of biblical knowledge from which a pastor could recognizably deviate, and which functioned as a standard by which the preaching and ministry of professing Christian pastors could be judged.

In other words, Paul had a biblical theology, and he exhorted the pastors whom he disciplined to stay faithful to it in their preaching and discipling.

This is what it means to be sound in the faith, or to preach sound doctrine. It is to believe, obey, and preach all the doctrine of the Bible in a way that is accurate, reliable, and faithful.

Why is Biblical Theology Important?

The simplest reason biblical theology is important is because God commands us to espouse it in all the passages that talk about the importance of soundness in doctrine.

Accounts Payable

Biblical theology is important for pastors because God will call every pastor to account for the way he has preached and ministered in the name of Christ (***Hebrews 13:17***).

As ambassadors, we are commissioned not to speak *our* word, but *God's* word. So our ministries will be judged by our faithfulness to believe, model, and preach God's truth.

As under-shepherds, we are commissioned to feed God's sheep on God's Word (***Matt 4:4; John 20:15-17***). Therefore, He will ask us whether or not we fed His sheep with the bread He gave us or the cotton candy for which they asked (***2 Tim 4:3***).

Health Nut

If man does not live on bread alone, but on the Word of God (**Matt 4:4**), then whether or not we get our theology right as pastors will have an effect on the health of our churches.

Biblical theology is like multi-grain bread - there's stuff in there that's really good for you. When we water down the theology of the Bible to avoid conflict, we bleach out the spiritual nutrients that cause growth, and begin to feed people on a white bread theology that has nearly no nutritional value.

Community Service

When we are clear on biblical theology, it is easier for the world to see how the church is different from the culture in which it lives.

This difference will either be attractive or repulsive. But either way, the church will be performing her function in her culture as *the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one, we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? (2 Cor 2:15-16).*

Marital Fidelity

One of the most important reasons biblical theology is important is for the corporate fidelity of the Bride of Christ, the Church, in her spousal relationship to the Bridegroom.

When we fudge on our biblical theology in order to make it easier to swallow, we are endangering the faithfulness of the Bride to her Bridegroom by blurring the lines between what is true about God and salvation, and what is actually idolatrous for us to think and believe.

What is the Function of Biblical Theology in the Life of the Local Church?

Corrects Our Understanding

We all have preconceived notions about who God is, humanity's biggest problem, and the solution to that problem.

Because we are each tainted with sin, our understanding of God and spiritual things has been skewed. Unless our misunderstandings about God and salvation are corrected, we will naturally cling to the traditions we subjectively prefer. The purpose of God's self-revelation in the Bible is to graciously correct the way we see our spiritual world so that our perceptions conform more closely to God's description of Himself, His creation, and the salvation He has provided.

Biblical theology therefore functions in the local church to objectively regulate our understanding of God and to give us a contextual framework in which to interpret our own spiritual experiences.

This way we are freed from relying on our own subjective preferences or traditions.

Protects Our Fidelity

Some scholars and pastors have argued that having an overarching biblical theology in mind spoils the integrity of the exegetical endeavor by assuming the conclusion in the premises.

Yet accurately understanding the part of any whole requires at least some broad understanding of the function and position of the part relative to the whole.

Biblical theology therefore functions in the local church to keep our detailed study and preaching accountable and faithful to the broad story line of the Bible.

Directs Our Methodology

Sometimes what we say can be obscured or contradicted by how we say it. When this happens, we have failed to let our message direct us in the selection of a complementary method.

Our understanding of the Bible's theology, even if that understanding is mistaken, will have important and specific ramifications for the way we go about preaching, evangelizing, discipling, leading in worship, administering church discipline, and a whole host of other practical pursuits.

Biblical theology therefore functions in the local church to keep our method from contradicting or obscuring our message.

Connects Our Worship

When we read the Bible piecemeal, hopping around from place to place with no real rhyme or reason, we only see small pieces of the integrated mural of redemption that has been painted for us.

When we pay attention to the major themes of the overall story in the Bible, we begin to see a richly woven tapestry of the character of the God we worship, and of the mighty acts of deliverance for which He is so famous and praiseworthy.

Biblical theology therefore functions in the local church to continually remind us of Who exactly it is that we are worshipping, and why it is that He alone deserves our undying trust, obedience, and praise.

Effects Our Application

If I have no idea what my wife's favorite flowers are, I will be hard pressed to please her with a bouquet of them when I come home from work. We simply cannot apply what we do not know.

If we want to live lives that please God in every way, then we must know something of who God is, what He desires from us, how he wants us to walk before Him, and the traits in His character that He delights to see reproduced in us.

Biblical theology therefore functions in the local church to notify pastor and parishioner alike of how we can please God in our behavior by showing us His character and ways written large on the canvas of redemption.

What are some of the most important aspects of Biblical Theology?

What is God Like?

God is a Creating God.

One of the very first things the Bible tells us about God is that He is a creating God.

God creates the universe and all the creatures in it (**Gen 1**).

God creates man in His own image as the pinnacle of His creation (**Gen 2**).

God creates a special people for Himself, starting with Abraham's election (**Gen 3**).

This creative activity of God gives Him a Creator's authority over His handiwork, meaning that He has the right to do whatever He wishes with whatever He has created.

This is in large part why His election of Abraham and Israel as a special people is completely fair and legitimate: He has a right to treat them in a special way because He owns everything that exists by virtue of creating it all.

God is a Holy God.

God's holiness has ramifications for our behavior if we are to enjoy a relationship with Him as our Father.

Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear (Isa 59:1-2).

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; You cannot tolerate wrong (Hab 1:13).

God's holiness as it relates to our sin is what makes atonement necessary for forgiveness.

Since all people sin (**1 Kings 8:46**), and since we can't deal with sin ourselves, Another must satisfy God's anger and reconcile us to God by sacrificing His life as the penalty for our sin (**Rom 6:23**).

All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one (Ps 14:3).

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin (Rom 3:20).

This is what Jesus Christ's sacrificial death accomplished – the satisfaction of God's holy anger and the restoration of our relationship with God (Heb 9:11-14, 23-28).

This view of our sin as separating us from God's holy presence has important ramifications for the way we go about leading people in the local church.

If we think people are basically good, then the church will need to build people's self esteem by building on the resident good in them.

If we think people are basically sinful and separated from God, then the church will need to clearly present the gospel of Jesus Christ as the only way to avoid God's anger and be reconciled to the One who created us.

God is a Faithful God.

The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished... (Ex 34:6-7).

God's faithfulness extends both to His commitment to oppose and punish sin, as well as His commitment to keep His good promises to those who fear Him.

Yet how can God be faithful both to "forgive wickedness" on the one hand and yet "not leave the guilty unpunished" on the other?

God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement...to demonstrate His justice at the present time, so as to be just and the One who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Rom 3:25, 26).

By executing our sentence on His Son, God reveals Jesus Christ to be the answer to the riddle of how God can forgive our wickedness while at the same time remaining faithful to punish the guilty.

Jesus Christ is therefore the fulfillment of God's promises – His promise of judgment for sin, and His promise of forgiveness for sinners.

God is a Loving God.

God's faithfulness is a function of His love. More specifically, He is faithful to forgive the sins of His people and bring them holiness because He loves them. God's love motivates His faithfulness.

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.... We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:10,19).

“Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:3-5).

“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

God is a Sovereign God.

God’s sovereignty enables Him to remain perfectly faithful to His promises of blessing and threats of judgment (Ps 135:6).

Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified Him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back His hand or say to him: ‘what have you done?’” (Dan 4:34-35).

Notice that the way the king praises God is to acknowledge specifically His sovereignty over all that He has created. When we refuse or are reticent to acknowledge God’s sovereignty, we are withholding praise from Him that is His due.

God’s sovereignty extends even to the salvation of sinners.

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls (Joel 2:32).

God has mercy on whom He wants to have mercy, and He hardens whom He wants to harden... Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Rom 9:18, 21).

Our acceptance or rejection of this truth will have implications for how we understand conversion and therefore how we do evangelism.

What is Man Like?

Dead Wait

Many Christians believe that man has been left just enough free will to freely decide to follow Christ of his own partially good volition. The Bible, however, presents a different picture.

We are naturally dead in our transgressions (Eph 2:1).

We are naturally God's powerless enemies (**Rom 5:6, 10**).

We are naturally void of righteous works that would commend us to God (**Titus 3:5**).

We are naturally unwilling to seek God of our own volition (**Isa 65:1**).

The Bible presents us as dead, powerless, and enemies of God apart from His regenerating grace. It is not that we must choose to wait for redemption even though we long for it. Nor is it that we must wait for God to repent and believe for us. It is that *we are not spiritually alive TO long for it*. We will remain inert in our deadness until God gives us the gifts of repentance and faith.

This is why the imagery of Jesus knocking politely on the door of our hearts is inaccurate. Jesus breaks down the door, finds us dead on the other side of it, and breathes life into us!

Under the Knife

What then does man need? The Bible says he needs a heart transplant.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow My decrees and be careful to keep My laws” (**Ezek 36:26-27**).

I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord. They will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with all their heart (**Jer 24:7**).

Man's greatest need, then, is a new heart, and conversion is therefore the work of God in extracting our hard hearts and giving us hearts that are soft to the salvation He has worked for us in Jesus.

This understanding of conversion corrects the popular misunderstanding that conversion is a prayer or decision that WE make for ourselves. We certainly do need to make a decision. But conversion is not something we do for ourselves. It's something God does in us.

What did Jesus do by Dying on the Cross?

Possibility or Reality?

Did Jesus secure the possibility of redemption for all people without exception, or did He accomplish the reality of redemption for a great many without distinction?

It is understandable and almost instinctive for us to want to believe that Jesus secured the possibility of redemption for all without exception.

The Bible says that God is love. If this is true, how can God intentionally leave some people in their unredeemed condition when so much is at stake?

The Bible says that God is fair. If this is true, how can God intentionally send Jesus to die for some people but not for others?

God created man in His own image. If this is true, doesn't man still have enough of that inherent goodness in him to choose God without God manipulating his decision before he makes it?

God created man with freedom. If this is true, isn't man's salvation ultimately dependent on a decision that he alone can make.

As intuitive as these considerations are, the Bible teaches us that Jesus' death accomplished the reality of redemption for a great many without distinction.

And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that He has given me, but raise them up on the last day (John 6:39). Securing a mere possibility would not allow Jesus to speak so confidently.

He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption...For this reason Christ is the mediator of the new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance (Heb 9:12,15). Jesus effectively obtained redemption by Himself, and He did so for those who are called. *Since that time [Jesus] waits for his enemies to be made His footstool, because by one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy (Heb 10:14).*

Biblical Theology and Your Church

Read **1 Tim 6:3-5**. How does Paul describe a person who teaches "false doctrine?" Why do you think it was so important to Paul that Timothy give his people "sound instruction" and "godly teaching?"

What does a person need to believe in order to become a member of your church? How do those beliefs distinguish your church from others in your area? On what issues does your church allow a measure of liberty?

Some doctrines that are unmistakably present in Scripture are often ignored or neglected because they have proven to be difficult, controversial, or even divisive. Is potential controversy a good reason for us to avoid conversation and instruction about these doctrines in our churches? Why or why not?

How do you think the Bible answers the following questions? Give scriptural references for your answers. Are people basically bad or good? What did Jesus Christ do by dying on the cross? What happens when someone becomes a Christian? If we are Christians, can we be sure that God will continue to care for us? If so, is His continuing care based on our faithfulness, or on His?

Paul writes in **Titus 1:9** that the leader of a congregation “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught.” Do you think that it is important for a pastor or elder to understand and embrace God’s sovereignty in salvation? What is the danger of a church leader who doubts God’s sovereignty in this area or who misunderstands biblical teaching on this matter?

Resources for Growth and Application

Goldsworthy, Graham. *The Goldsworthy Trilogy: Gospel and Kingdom, Gospel and Wisdom, The Gospel in Revelation* (Cambridge: Paternoster), 2000.

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