Interpreting God's plan: biblical theology and the pastor (Explorations 11)

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Is Biblical Theology Viable?

Graeme Goldsworthy

Synopsis

Biblical theology as a distinct discipline has come under close scrutiny in recent times. Many, including evangelicals, doubt its viability. Part of the problem is the lack of any agreed definition of ‘biblical theology’. Some scepticism stems from historical and philosophical considerations while some is generated by the sheer size of the task of dealing with the Bible as a whole.

This paper examines the usefulness of beginning our investigation into biblical theology from three different points: the history of the name ‘biblical theology’; the modern evangelical biblical theology movement; and the apostolic gospel. The first is unsatisfactory because of the lack of uniform understanding of what is involved, and because biblical theology as we now understand it began long before the name was coined. The second shows a vigorous pursuit of a way of looking at the Bible as a whole, but a failure to work out a consistent approach. A viable biblical theology is not only possible but demanded by the witness of Jesus and the apostles. It starts with the implications of the gospel for the unity of the Bible and takes its lead from the way the apostles preached Christ as the fulfilment of the OT.

Evangelical presuppositions concerning the Bible are taken as a starting point which must come under constant scrutiny. They are consistent with the emergence of a biblical theology which has apostolic authority, and which understands redemptive revelation in three stages following on the creation revelation of Eden. These three stages involve salvation revealed in Israel up
to Solomon and the temple, a recapitulation of that revelation in prophetic eschatology, and the fulfilment in Christ.

Introduction: the challenge to viability

Recently I was a member of a consultative committee which was discussing the formation of a curriculum for theological training. I ventured the suggestion that a course in biblical theology would be appropriate. Another member of the committee, who has a PhD in NT, objected that the draft curriculum already contained such a course, and pointed to the doctrine segments.

In the discussion that followed it became clear to me that this person understood ‘Biblical Theology’ to mean theology that was in accord with the Bible in contrast with unbiblical (and therefore heretical) theology. That is a confusion that one continues to encounter. How, then, do we define biblical theology and, more importantly, is there such a discipline which is viable, useful, and valid?

The difficulties in arriving at an agreed definition of biblical theology should not deter us from proposing some kind of working definition which can then be finetuned if necessary. Negatively, there seems to be some agreement that biblical theology is theology that has not moved, beyond the forms in the Bible, to the formulation of Christian doctrine. On the positive side there is a recognition of some kind of unity in the Bible which attaches to its theology. Those who accept the validity of biblical theology also have broad agreement that it is concerned to describe the theology which is in the biblical books, and to do so in a way that reflects the theological methods or perspectives of the biblical authors.

To us who have come to think of biblical theology as an essential component of our biblical study, and as part of the necessary exegetical framework for understanding the message of the Bible, the notion that others, especially evangelicals, could have doubts about the viability of the discipline is almost unthinkable. Yet it is true that there are very different ideas about what biblical theology consists of. Furthermore, the widespread pastoral neglect of the subject results not only from ignorance of the apparent gains from employing it but also from a real
scepticism concerning the legitimacy of such an approach to the Bible.

There are a number of possible reasons for such scepticism, and these must be addressed if we are to persist in our belief that biblical theology is essential to a good grasp of the Bible's message and to a sound interpretation and application of the text to our contemporaries. The problems in the doing of biblical theology are well documented and widely discussed. For example, H. G. Reventlow focussed on the problem of the unity of the Bible, and especially on the relationship between the two testaments. Don Carson has referred to the main challenges to biblical theology resulting from different presuppositions about the text and the nature of revelation. He also refers to the methodological challenges in using the range of exegetical tools over the whole Bible. Carson points us to the important problem of an organising principle, which is probably one of the most contentious issues in the contemporary debate. Finally there is the question of how biblical theology relates to the formulation of doctrine and to pastoral practice. I believe it is true to say that all of these matters are only different expressions of the central question of the nature and authority of Scripture.

David Adams points to three trends which threaten a genuine biblical theology. The first is the refusal to engage with theology as theology so that the biblical endeavour is reduced to the history of religions. The second is the exclusive attention to a diachronic approach to the text which excludes the synchronic or canonical approach. The third is the tendency to see biblical theology as theology so that the biblical endeavour is reduced to a diachronic or canonical approach. The third is the tendency to see

4 It should be noted that the terms 'diachronic' and 'synchronic' can be applied in two distinct ways that easily cause confusion. When applied to the text, a synchronic approach focuses on the text as it is in the canon, while the diachronic attempts to penetrate the biblical text to its historical antecedents. The assumption here is often that it is the original saying or text which interests us rather than the way it has grown and been adapted into its final form. It is this textual evolutionism that Adams is criticising. By contrast, the synchronic approach looks at the text as we have it in its canonical form. But when we apply these terms to the theological concepts of the Bible, the synchronic approach asks about the theology at any given point in time or of any given biblical author or corpus.

1 diversity without unity, to view the faith of Israel as polydox and polyphonic. These three tendencies have a long history stemming from the presuppositions of the Enlightenment and the historical-critical method. They touch the heart of the matter in that they challenge our view of Scripture as the inspired word of God.

Perhaps more serious for the evangelical theologian is the strenuous attack of James Barr on the whole way we do biblical theology, and especially on the idea of salvation-history. Barr's attack focuses on the influence of neo-orthodoxy. He raises legitimate questions about the nature of history and of biblical history-writing which evangelical biblical theologists must take seriously. But these questions are not largely different from the ones which emerged with historical criticism and the consequent scepticism about what really happened. We have seen this debate carried on through a whole range of philosophical views. We cannot be satisfied with the existential approach of Bultmann, who seems indifferent to whether the events of biblical salvation-history actually took place. On the other hand, we are coming to recognise more that biblical historians did not necessarily operate with the same canons of historicity as modern historiography.

The challenges to the viability of biblical theology, then, are of two kinds: the theoretical or philosophical, and the practical. If this is the case, then the first step in resolving the legitimacy of our approach to biblical theology is to identify our presuppositions concerning Scripture. The second step is to try to understand how our presuppositions will affect the quest for a biblical theology. Thirdly, we need to question our presuppositions and whether they need some modification.

Before doing this, I will endeavour to contextualise the discussion by examining the implications of three starting points in our investigation of biblical theology. The first starting point is the history of the term 'biblical theology'. The second starting point

4 (continued) through the biblical history. An evangelical biblical theology would favour a synchronic approach to the text while employing both synchronic and diachronic approaches to the theological content of the Bible.

is the modern evangelical approach to the writing of biblical theology. Then I will consider a third starting point: a gospel-centred approach to biblical theology. My aim is to show that the historical studies are valuable but are not the grounds for an authentic and viable biblical theology. A gospel-centred approach alone will suffice as the basis of such a biblical theology.

The history of the name ‘biblical theology’ as our starting point

One starting point for this investigation is the origin of biblical theology as a self-conscious discipline and the use of the term as a way of designating a definable approach to the study of theology. This is problematical, since there is no reason why the term should be used in a consistent way, nor that the history of its usage should be tied to one identifiable approach. But at least we can explore the history of the name ‘biblical theology’ and see if it is productive.

Some surveys of the history of biblical theology start with J. P. Gabler and his inaugural lecture at Altdorf in 1787. Gabler is important for making a distinction between biblical theology and dogmatic theology. But he was not the first to use the term ‘biblical theology’. Hans-Joachim Kraus notes the background of the Reformation dogma of sola scriptura as necessary for biblical theology to arise as a discipline. The title ‘biblical theology’ first occurred, according to Kraus, in a 1629 work by Wolfgang Jacob Christmann. Then came the biblical theologies of Henricus Diest (1643) and Sebastian Schmidt (1671). These are characterised by the proof-texting of dogmas. The point about the Reformation background is that the Old and New Testaments were seen as sufficient for faith and salvation, contrary to the position of the Roman Catholic church. However, with time, biblical theology was also seen as a rejection of certain features of Protestant dogmatic theology.

In the seventeenth century, Reformation covenant theology was given new impetus and shape with scholars like Coccejus, who saw God’s revelation as a series of stages within the history of God’s people. There is a possibility that Coccejus depended on the work of Georg Calixt (1654). The latter shows that in the seventeenth century there was an interest in what we refer to as salvation-history.

The other dimension of the development of biblical theology was the pietist revolt against what was seen to be an increasingly sterile orthodox dogmatics. The so-called Protestant scholasticism was, according to Gerhard Ebeling, at least in part due to the failure to work through the implications of the Reformation’s sola scriptura. Any tension between exegesis and dogmatics was excluded, because ‘exegesis was enclosed within the frontiers fixed by systematic theology’. Whether that is a fair assessment or the filtered interpretation of an Enlightenment thinker is not vital to our discussion. The pietists of the seventeenth century were certainly concerned about dogmatic orthodoxy, rightly or wrongly, and urged the need to distinguish between biblical theology and scholastic theology. Philip Jacob Spener’s Pia Desideria (1675) is a case in point. Ebeling comments thus:

For the understanding of the concept ‘biblical theology’ at the time of its origin the following point is significant: it is the slogan of a programme of theological reform which directed its criticism neither at the content of Orthodox dogmatics nor at its methodological form as systematic theology, but only at certain accretions, namely, at the fact that, as Spener says, there has been ‘much introduced into theology which is alien, useless and savours more of the wisdom of the world’.

According to Kraus, the influence of such Pietism in the writing of biblical theology is first seen in the Biblische Theologie of Carl Haymann (1708).

We see, then, that there are two initial considerations in the history of biblical theology: the driving force or forces, and the driving consequence of that activity.
typical shape which develops into a salvation-history format. Carl Friedrich Bahrdt's *Versuch eines biblischen Systems der Dogmatik* (1770) was both a rejection of the 'complicated world of scholastic theology' and an examination of the structure of divine revelation. The question of the relationship of the testaments was posed in terms of the unity and the distinctions, something, of course, that Calvin had dealt with over two hundred years earlier. Bahrdt distinguished four periods in OT revelation: 1. from the fall to the flood; 2. from the flood to Moses; 3. from Moses to the Babylonian exile; and 4. from the exile to Herod the Great. Ebeling presses the point that Pietism was unable to draw from the concept 'biblical theology' the decisive methodological consequences.

For Ebeling it is the Enlightenment which provided an understanding of the consequences which saw biblical theology becoming the actual rival of dogmatics. This is not the rejection of dogmatics but the setting up of biblical theology as an independent discipline justified in its own right. In this regard Gabler's inaugural address of 1787 is usually said to be important. He proposed a distinction between biblical and dogmatic theology. His aim was to try to bring some unity into the theological discussion, in which the variety of views of the orthodox, pietists, and rationalists bred confusion. He first distinguished between the simple basic beliefs necessary for living life and for salvation (religion) and the more complicated and abstract statements of theology. The historical nature of biblical theology is not a way of giving pre-eminence to history. History is secondary to what is true. As Sandys-Wunsch and Eldridge comment on Gabler:

The task of biblical theology is to work out what the truth contained in Scripture is. When he says that biblical theology is of historical origin, then, what he means is that

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12 Kraus, 28, 29.
13 For example in his treatment of the relationship between the testaments in Book II.10,11 of the *Institutes*.
14 Ebeling, 86.
16 Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, 147.
17 *Biblische Theologie oder Untersuchung des biblischen Grundes der vornehmsten theologischen Lehren* (1771).
18 Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, 152.
19 Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, 157 and footnote 1: 'Later Gabler came to describe this as the difference between *wahre* and *reine* biblical theology.'
The effect of the Enlightenment on the course of biblical theology must not be confused with the essence and viability of biblical theology. Gabler's attempt to establish the validity of both biblical and dogmatic theology raises the important question of the relationship of the two. The answer to this question is dependent on how the two theological disciplines are perceived and how the source of revelation in Scripture is understood. If biblical theology is conceived of as purely descriptive and historical, it will reject, in all probability, any dogmatic principles that might define its method or limits. The question then arises as to whether a biblical theology leaves any room at all for dogmatics. However, once it is recognised that presuppositions play their foundational part in shaping exegesis and theological method, the question becomes a philosophical-theological one of the nature of such presuppositions.

The cleavage of biblical theology into the two disciplines of OT theology and NT theology is as regrettable as it was inevitable. It might be argued that it was inevitable purely on the grounds of division of labour. As biblical studies developed more and more specialities it was simply not possible for one person to be a specialist in the whole Bible. It is more likely, however, that the cleavage was due to the attack on the canon as the authoritative source of revelation. According to Wilfrid Harrington, the first biblical theology written according to Gabler's principles was the Theology of the Old Testament of G. L. Bauer (1796). It is clear that the unity of the Bible was by then not well defended by orthodox dogma, nor by the concept of a canon of inspired Scripture.

In time, the development of historical criticism on the basis of Enlightenment presuppositions led to the rejection of the notion of revelation, and biblical theology became absorbed into the study of the history of religious ideas in the Bible. The historical philosophy of Hegel gave rise to the idea of religious evolution, so that, for example, W. Vatke in his Religion des AT (1835) distinguished the pre-prophetic, the prophetic, and the post-prophetic periods in Israel in terms of simple and primitive notions developing into more complex and sophisticated ones.

This evolutionary approach was later developed by Graf and Wellhausen.

The history of religions movement thrived on historical criticism. The twentieth century saw a resurgence of activity in the writing of OT and NT theologies, but almost no biblical theologies. Pietism and a tenacious orthodoxy had persevered during the ascendancy of the history of religions movement in the nineteenth century. There are at least three dimensions to the twentieth-century scene. Firstly, traditional or evangelical orthodoxy continued to maintain pre-Enlightenment presuppositions to the doing of theology. This is not to say that conservative writers were completely preserved from the effects of the Enlightenment, nor that they completely ignored the gains of the new critical methods. But orthodoxy maintained that the presuppositions of biblical study were themselves revealed in the Bible. Secondly, the methods of the critical theologians underwent some changes, and different questions were being asked from those of the early historical-critical liberalism. Thirdly, neo-orthodoxy questioned the whole structure of Enlightenment thinking and allowed theological questions again to be asked of the biblical text.

According to Brevard Childs the modern, especially the American, biblical theology failed to come to terms with the authority of Scripture. Ironically, Childs’ canonical approach has not produced a viable biblical theology for the very same reason. Childs’ contribution could easily occupy a whole paper or, indeed, a whole school of theology. Yet, without wanting to take away from his achievement, it has to be said that from an evangelical point of view he has not really recovered a biblical method. At best he has pointed a way back to doing theology on

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21 Harrington, 20.


24 Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments (London: SCM, 1992). This volume of over 700 pages is a mine of information and contains a very useful section of prolegomena. But when it comes to the content of biblical theology, it would seem that Childs’ canonical approach is not robust enough to allow him to draw the various traditions of the Scriptures together into any recognisable unity. He is so busy chasing various ‘trajectories’ (a word he uses ad nauseam) that he seems to miss the significance of the apostolic view of the one story.
the Bible's own terms but has not extended canonical shape to canonical authority.

As a postscript to this section I propose that the practical separation of the testaments is a serious challenge to the viability of biblical theology. A theology of the OT or a theology of the NT is not a biblical theology, however much there may be a convergence of methods employed by each. This is not to criticise the contributions of those who have written in each field, but only to lament the fact that modern scholarly standards have contributed to the feeling that no-one is clever enough or can live long enough to write a biblical theology on the whole of the canon. The twentieth century has seen the production of many theologies of either testament but very few attempts at a theology of both testaments. This has highlighted the problem of the relationship between the testaments and, one might suggest, led to various kinds of distortion in scholarly perspectives on the Bible. The danger of such distortion for the NT theologian is arguably less than for the OT theologian. This is because NT theologians have as their primary sources documents which clearly understand themselves in relation to the OT and constantly refer to it.

The OT theologian who writes from within a Christian tradition may adopt an approach which is more or less focussed on some concept of a relationship with what emerges in the NT. It is interesting how some OT theologians have included prefaces or excursuses setting out the need to understand the OT in relation to the New and then seem to ignore totally their own advice (for example, Eichrodt, von Rad, Vriezen).

It must be concluded that the name 'biblical theology' does not lead us to a definitive concept of a viable discipline. On the one hand, we must accept that biblical theology has been around considerably longer than the title and, on the other hand, we see that the name has been used to apply to a whole range of different approaches. These have largely been marked by different philosophical starting points. May we propose, then, that those who share the same basic evangelical understanding of the nature and authority of the Bible will provide a more authentic starting point?

The Modern Evangelical Biblical Theology Movement as our starting point

As a student at Moore College in the mid-fifties, I was introduced to biblical theology primarily through two books and through a lecture given by the then vice principal, Donald Robinson. The two books were John Bright's *The Kingdom of God* (1955) and Geerhardus Vos’s *Biblical Theology Old and New Testaments* (first published 1948). Later, Edmund Clowney’s *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (1961) reinforced much of what I had learnt from these others.

John Bright: *The Kingdom of God*

Bright’s book is a biblical theology in that it retells the biblical story through the eyes of a historian who is a theologian and a believer. It takes a thematic approach dictated by the gospel witness to the kingdom of God and traces that idea through the whole Bible. Bright’s critical presuppositions show in that he begins the OT story with Israel in the promised land. The historian’s concern for the recovery of what lay behind the

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26 I use the term ‘movement’ loosely, though not without justification. As an evangelical movement, it predates the so-called American biblical theology movement, which was largely driven by neo-orthodoxy.
30 Bright’s prolegomenon to *A History of Israel* is the monograph *Early Israel in Recent History Writing* (London: SCM Press, 1956). Bright’s case, as he argues it against Martin Noth, is essentially that we can have reasonable confidence in the biblical documents as historical records. However, he argues on the basis of probability rather than of a doctrine of Scripture. It would appear that he adopts much the same presuppositions as Noth but does not share the latter’s scepticism about the records of early Israel.

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documents does not allow the theologian in him to deal with the patriarchs and the exodus other than as Israel’s memory. The strength of Bright’s book is the sense of the unity of Scripture and its testimony to the coming of the kingdom of God. He writes with warm piety and pastoral concern, but he cannot be said in either The Kingdom of God or his The Authority of the Old Testament to represent an evangelical position on the nature and authority of Scripture.

Geerhardus Vos: Biblical Theology Old and New Testaments

Geerhardus Vos lectured and wrote from a position of Reformed orthodoxy. His work has had a great influence among Reformed Protestant theological students, certainly of my generation. Vos did two things for us: he gave us a clear, if brief, statement of the principles and method of biblical theology, and gave us an example of how the task should be done. Vos’s Biblical Theology Old and New Testaments has some curious weaknesses. While it is useful to have his interactions with the various critical positions of his day, and his treatments of revelation and the nature of prophecy, these would have been better placed in a prolegomenon. But worse, Vos virtually ignores the whole of the former prophets and moves from Mosaic revelation to the latter prophets. In so far as Samuel and Kings appear in the book, it is in the section dealing with the nature of the prophetic office. Thus the whole theology of the former prophets is missing as is the wisdom literature.

Even more extraordinary is Vos’s treatment of the NT. While there are some brief references to the Acts and the epistles, these are in the context of the ministry of Jesus. But, even here, there is a sudden halt to the work with the life of Jesus. The death, resurrection and ascension are not noted even in the index. Now, Vos died in 1949, the year after his biblical theology, edited by his son, was published. But there are no indications given by either editor or publisher that illness or impending death was what caused the book to be unfinished.

Vos’s inaugural lecture as Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Seminary, 1894, gives a better indication of where he could have taken his work in a comprehensive and Christ-centred way. Here he defines biblical theology as: ‘that part of Exegetical Theology which deals with the revelation of God in its historic continuity’. Stressing the historical element, Vos goes on to define biblical theology as, ‘the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity’. Whatever defects we might find in Vos’s work, his inaugural lecture is in stark contrast with that of one of his successors, J. C. Beker, whose inaugural address as Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton was given in 1968. Beker seemed more concerned to castigate biblical theology than to promote and commend it.

But the failure of Vos to finish his best-known work is not, in my opinion, as significant as the defects in his actual analysis of the OT revelation. Anyone can see the work is incomplete. It is more difficult to critique what is there. His introduction sets out certain principles, starting with the presupposition of God and his revelation. One such principle is that of periodicity, or the recognition of epochs in biblical revelation. When he comes to the latter prophets his treatment is more in the format of a systematic theology: attributes of God, covenant, sin, and restoration. This tends to be done without reference to the significance of the ongoing historical process, and little, if anything, is made of the different perspectives of pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic prophecy. I would conclude that Vos has not been as successful as we might wish in carrying out his own principles.

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33 Gaffin, 10.

34 Gaffin, 15 (italics his).

Edmund Clowney: Preaching and Biblical Theology

Edmund Clowney follows in Vos's footsteps and shows some developments and refinements. He defines the redemptive-historical development in terms of the periods marked by creation, the fall, Abraham, the exodus, and the advent. He does not explain why he would use these parameters, nor how the designated epochs relate. Everybody recognises that there is development in the biblical message, and listing a series of significant events and people is hardly profound. Periodicity is not the issue. The issue is whether or not the various parts can be said to hang together in some kind of meaningful whole, and, if they do, what kind of unity they form. The same weakness, it seems to me emerges in Clowney's more recent book The Unfolding Mystery.36

Willem VanGemeren: The Progress of Redemption

Amore recent work of biblical theology is Willem VanGemeren's The Progress of Redemption (1988).37 This author indicates his indebtedness to both Vos and Clowney. His epochal analysis involves twelve periods of redemptive history: creation; fall; election and promise; a holy nation (Exod – Josh); a nation like other nations (Judg – 1 Sam 15); a royal nation (1 Sam 16 – 1 Kgs 11); a divided nation (1 Kgs 12 – 2 Kgs 25); a restored nation (Ezra, Neh, prophets); Jesus and the kingdom; apostolic era; the kingdom and the church. Now there is no doubt that these epochs exist, though it is not clear what the significance of 'epoch' is seen to be. VanGemeren's presuppositions include the acceptance of the Bible as the word of God and the word of man, and the recognition that the theological centre of the Bible is Jesus Christ. He indicates that the redemptive-historical significance of the various epochs must be seen in the light of Jesus Christ. The twelve periods are 'convenient dividers along the long road of redemptive history'.38 He admits that the number twelve is arbitrary. It appears that they are chosen, not for any organic or theological reason, but because they constitute a convenient succession of stages leading to the culmination in Christ.

The epochal structure of redemptive history is more than a convenient way of handling a large corpus, as I'm sure VanGemeren would agree. But it appears that his method does not take sufficient account of his own principles, and especially that of the centrality of Jesus Christ. Biblical theology is not a matter of carving the Bible into manageable chunks and then investigating how the various parts relate to one another and especially to the coming of Christ. If VanGemeren's presuppositions are sustainable, and I firmly believe they are, then the gospel must be taken as the guide to the essential, as against convenient, epochal structure of the canonical revelation. How did Jesus and the apostles see the epochs and the progressive stages of redemptive history? In other words, if the Bible has a real theological unity while being a progressive record of redemptive revelation, the epochs should help us to relate the parts to the whole in a way that reveals more than a sequence of people and events. It must yield interpretative principles.

There are other evangelical works that we could consider which are specifically concerned with either OT theology or NT theology.39 Our concern here is with biblical theology which, by definition, deals with the whole Bible. Theologies of either testament have made important contributions to biblical studies, and some have opened up the question of biblical-theological method in a significant way. But the downside is that the splitting of the

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36 Edmund Clowney, The Unfolding Mystery (Leicester: IVP, 1988). To be fair to the author it must be said that this is not strictly a biblical theology. It is a popularly and, it must said, warmly written book with the subtitle, Discovering Christ in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, Clowney's biblical theological concern is evident throughout.


38 VanGemeren, 32.

39 For example, E.A. Martens, Plot and Purpose in the Old Testament (Leicester: IVP, 1981); W.C. Kaiser, Toward an Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962); G.E. Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). These, and many others, employ varieties of biblical-theological method, but they are, by definition, not biblical theologies. I would go further to say that, whatever the benefits of the many theologies of either testament, the tendency to split the Bible into two sections which are dealt with separately has not served the cause of biblical theology well.
canon has become more than a matter of specialisation and division of labour. It has in practical terms become the actual hermeneutical divide in so much that passes for Christian teaching and preaching.

We must ask why evangelical biblical theologians, who start with essentially the same presuppositions about the Bible, produce such a wide diversity of approaches. One possibility is that the nature of the biblical data is such that it allows such diversity. Another possibility is that the implications of our doctrine of Scripture have yet to be worked out in relation to biblical theological method. It is to this latter concern that I now turn.

The gospel as our starting point

An evangelical approach to biblical theology (or to any kind of theology for that matter) must begin with the person of Jesus Christ. Some would argue that we must begin with the Bible as the word of God inscripturate since that is our only source of knowledge of Jesus as the Word of God incarnate. Both views have validity. It is the Christ of the Bible who meets us in his gospel and converts us from being the enemies of God to being his friends. Let us accept for the moment the presuppositions that God is there, and that he has spoken by the prophets in the OT and, latterly, by his Son in the NT (Heb 1:1,2).

The biblical testimony to Jesus has many implications for the way we understand the Bible.

i. Jesus is declared to be the truth who makes God known. He is the God-man who makes God known in relation to sinners as the gracious, saving God.

ii. This same incarnated Word, Jesus, breaks the vicious cycle of humankind’s rebellion against God, being given over by God to this state of rebellion and consequent judgment. He is the truth, not simply the information giver. Human beings need more than information about God. The race is in deep moral revolt against God, and, if it is to benefit from special revelation, it must be a redemptive word that God speaks.

iii. God does not speak a variety of different words. The word of the prophets (OT) and the word of the Son (NT) are one word. Moreover, without ever ignoring the important distinctions between them, we must say that the word inscripturate (canon of Old and NTs) and the Word incarnate (Jesus) are the same word. The most important distinction is that the Word incarnate is the living God whom we worship, while the word inscripturate is an inspired collection of books which we do not worship. What is often ignored by those who use slogans such as, ‘God does not reveal propositions but himself’, is that the distinction thus made is meaningless. Without the word inscripturate we cannot know the Word incarnate nor the God revealed in the Word himself. It is curious how some scholars are so keen to assert by propositions that God cannot, or will not, communicate propositionally.

iv. The one word of God centres on the gospel event, the life death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The word of the prophets testifies to this one redemptive event. The constant testimony of the NT is that the Word incarnate claims to sum up the prophetic word. The Word incarnate and the word inscripturate are distinguishable but inseparable.

It is here that we must remind ourselves of our presuppositions. These can be of different orders and be expressed in a variety of ways. We will rarely feel constrained to try to enunciate an absolute starting point in metaphysical terms. We assume that such a starting point, or something like it, would be universally accepted. Wherever we do focus on our assumptions they must always be open to question. It is not a matter of an arbitrary choice which none may query. We do our best to identify the working presuppositions which we apply in any endeavour, and to submit them to regular scrutiny. Presuppositions may be questioned as to what prior presuppositions they imply,

40 The accusation often made against evangelicals, and even more often against fundamentalists, that these positions involve bibliolatry is not in accord with the facts. Both of these groups would recognise clearly the distinctions mentioned.
whether they are self-consistent or are self-referrentially incoherent, as Carl Henry puts it, and how well they explain our experience of reality.

I have suggested elsewhere an evangelical presuppositional framework for biblical theology. This is based on the notion that God’s truth, as it exists in the Bible, must be self-authenticating. We can, therefore, examine the Scriptures to see if there is a coherent and self-consistent understanding of truth and of how we as thinking and rational beings can attain to it. The following, I suggest, summarises the biblical position:

i. God, who made all things, exists and he alone, as the creator of all things, interprets the meaning of things and events.

ii. Being created in the image of God, we know that we are dependent on God for the truth.

iii. As sinners we suppress this knowledge and reinterpret the universe on the basis that we give all things and events their meaning.

iv. Special revelation, which not only informs us but is also redemptive, is needed to deal with our hostile suppression of the truth.

v. We will hear this redemptive word, the gospel of Christ, only as the Holy Spirit of God brings us to repentance and faith.

These presuppositions are arrived at by taking the Bible as our source of information. They are part of our hermeneutical spiral in which we move from assumption to text and back again in order to develop an understanding of the reality presented in the Bible. The reason we have such presuppositions is that the message about Jesus Christ has arrested us and brought us to a new mind about God and his word. This must be our starting point for a biblical theology. The doubts that various scholars have expressed about the viability of biblical theology are essentially doubts about the viability of evangelical presuppositions. The exact nature of biblical theology is, of course, a matter for continuing debate.

Thus, it is the apostolic testimony to the gospel that must structure our understanding of the way God’s revelation has come to us in the Bible. We are driven by the gospel to understand both the mode of revelation and the content of it. The introduction to the Epistle to the Hebrews points to the reality of the two testaments and to their unity: God spoke in former times through the prophets, and has spoken in these last days through his Son. The exposition of the OT in the light of Christ, which this epistle gives, shows up the historically structured unity and distinction that characterises the word of the prophets and the word of Jesus.

What, then, is the apostolic gospel which must govern our understanding of biblical theology? If we view the gospel as event, then it is the defining parameters of the event which mark out the content of the gospel. If we view the gospel as the proclamation of the event, the same parameters apply. Proclamation without the event is powerless to save, but the event needs to be proclaimed if people are to believe it (Rom 10:5–17). The four gospels agree that the parameters of the gospel are those of the earthly existence of Jesus of Nazareth culminating in his death on the cross, his resurrection and ascension to the Father in heaven. The gospel includes the God-given interpretation of the events of Jesus. Thus we must accept that this Jesus fulfils the promises of God; that he lived and died for the sake of others; that he was the God-man from heaven; that his life, death, and resurrection are the means and the grounds of our being put into right relationship with God.

The NT notion of the kingdom of God is the fulfilment of the OT. According to Mark, the gospel of God which Jesus preached contained certain basic elements (Mk 1:14,15). It was firstly a message of fulfilment. Both the literary and historical contexts of
the assertion that 'the time is fulfilled' would lead us to the conclusion that Jesus understood the historically based prophetic word of the OT to be at the point of fulfilment in his own ministry. Secondly, the message concerned the arrival of the kingdom of God. This can only mean that Jesus understood the content of the prophetic message to be the coming of the kingdom of God. It is clear from Luke 24:27,44,45 and other passages that Jesus understood that the OT was about him and his saving ministry.

Not only was the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus the climax of the gospel event, it was the reaching of the goal of the OT. An analysis of the preaching of the gospel shows how this message of Jesus was taken up in the post-Pentecost apostolic church.

i. The note of fulfilment of the OT Scriptures was prominent.
ii. The content of the message was the person of Jesus of Nazareth in his life, death, and resurrection.
iii. The coming of the kingdom is a reality in the present rule of the ascended and exalted Christ.
iv. The whole of the OT message reaches its goal in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus.

Our basic premise is that all theologising should be controlled by the gospel. From the summary above we conclude that the apostles certainly regarded the message about Jesus as definitive for all theologising. It is the message about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to which the whole Bible, both Old and NTs, testify. It is not that God could not, or did not, say anything apart from Christ in the gospel, for we are told that the creation testifies to his glory. But we must hasten to add that the creation revelation and the gospel revelation, though distinct, are not to be separated. After all, it is the gospel which is bringing the regeneration of the whole cosmos. The ultimate meaning of the cosmos and its destiny can only be found in the gospel. The gospel tells us that the redemptive work of God is to be found in Christ alone. Redemptive history in the OT is therefore somehow about Christ. The

inescapable dimension in all this is the historical process which leads to the coming of the Word of God in the incarnation of Jesus.

The centrality of the gospel to the Bible and its theology is thus established by the NT. This has a number of ramifications for the way we do theology and the way we thus think about reality. It demands that our starting point is the self-authenticating word of God so that we develop a hermeneutics of revelation and grace, not of human autonomy and nature. Creation cannot be separated from redemption since the ultimate plan of God in creation is defined in terms of Christ (Col 1:15–17). Regeneration of the universe is not merely a rehabilitation job but rather the purpose for which generation (creation) was initially effected.

The gospel pattern of redemption is definitive for understanding all notions of redemption in the Bible. Thus, redemptive history in the OT, which is fulfilled in the gospel, takes its pattern from the gospel. This is not to say that there is not something self-evident about the structure of the OT which helps us in our interpretation of the NT. But, if the word of God in Jesus can be characterised as God's fullest revelation, then the principal focus must be on the interpretation of the OT by the gospel. Now, the climax of the gospel message is clearly the exaltation of the crucified Christ. How then does the OT present a foreshadowing of this event? If we were left to look for a murdered redeemer rising from the dead in the OT it would indeed be a puzzle. But the gospel is proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles in terms of OT events in a way which establishes the gospel as the hermeneutical key.

This is why I am firmly of the conviction that the three-fold structure taught to me by Donald Robinson is superior to, and more theologically productive than, the structures proposed by Vos, Clowney, and VanGemeren. Donald Robinson has pinpointed the gospel structure in the OT rather than merely a series of consecutive periods. These periods, of course, exist, but their interrelatedness and relation to the gospel is crucial to a viable and powerful biblical theology. The other writers mentioned do indeed recognise the goal of the whole of the OT in Christ. But it seems that they have tended to work more from a descriptive approach to the OT as it leads them to Christ. The gospel demands that we start with Jesus Christ and the apostolic gospel

43 This has been amply demonstrated in C. H. Dodd's classic treatment of the apostolic gospel in The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1944).
to see how the OT is conceived as that which testifies to Christ and shows God at work to redeem his people. The following points may be made:

i. The gospel is understood in terms of OT redemptive history climaxing in David and Solomon

In the course of expounding the meaning of Jesus and his death and resurrection, the NT writers focus on him and understand him as creator, word of God, Adam, son of Abraham, Israel, son of David, prophet, priest, king, wise man, temple and so on. The very first Christian sermon identifies the resurrection with the fulfilment of the rule of the Davidic king (Acts 2:30–36). There is an historical and redemptive logic to all this which corresponds to the structure of the OT. Creation and fall are the indispensable precursors to redemptive history, which is why creation and Eden are so closely linked to the later eschatology. In the meantime themes such as the promised land maintain the essential link. Creation and fall, then, lead to the election of Israel and redemption culminating in the Davidic kingdom with the temple at its centre. There is manifest diversity in the historical process and an undeniable imperfection, but the pattern is nevertheless clear. The recreative-redemptive process in the history of humankind is found exclusively in the biblical history which focuses on the affairs of Israel and climaxes in the Davidic-Solomonic rule in Jerusalem.

ii. The prophetic eschatology is a recapitulation of the history of redemption in Israel

The inbuilt ambiguity of the historical process in the OT, due to the innate propensity of even the elect to rebel against grace, does not leave us without help. The prophetic word provides a recapitulation of the redemptive-history of Israel when it addresses the problem of sin and judgment. The history of Israel shows a degeneration from the time of Solomon’s apostasy. This fact could be said to highlight the climax of redemptive history in 1 Kings 1–10, for thereafter it is a slide into destruction. But the prophetic word emphasises that alongside rebellion and judgment there is the sovereign purpose of a gracious God.

Prophetic eschatology, then, projects the future, perfect, and glorious fulfilment of God’s purposes for his people in a kingdom yet to come. This eschatology is set against the historical background of the destruction of Israel and Judah and the Babylonian exile. It could be argued that prophetic eschatology begins with the promises to David in 2 Samuel 7 and there is no reason why epochs of redemptive revelation should not overlap. The historic dynasty of David, and the idealised prophetic dynasty are thus linked. While the restoration of the exiles under Cyrus is seen as in some sense a fulfilment of the prophetic promises, it is incomplete and lacking in the perfection and glory which are integral to the promises. Thus the OT closes in tension between promise and the non-experience of fulfilment.

iii. The gospel shows the epochal structure of redemptive history from Abraham to Solomon

We must conclude, then, that a gospel-based approach to the structure of the OT leads us to recognise two primary epochs or expressions of the coming of the kingdom of God which foreshadow the gospel. Following the lead given by Donald Robinson we can state these as the kingdom revealed in the history of Israel from Abraham to Solomon, and secondly as the kingdom of God revealed in prophetic eschatology. The unity of these two expressions lies in the prophetic recapitulation of the historical events of election, exodus redemption from captivity, law, entry and possession of the land, Davidic kingship, temple and Jerusalem. The distinction lies in the prophetic understanding that the eschatological event will transcend the historical by being perfect, glorious, and eternal. The logic lies in the fact that the prophetic recapitulation is from creation to new creation, but that this cosmic regeneration is inseparable from the renewal of the redemptive events from the Abrahamic covenant to the high-point of David’s kingship and Solomon’s temple. And that is the emphasis found in the NT.

iv. The pivotal point of redemption is the resurrection

The heart of my argument, then, is this: the pivotal point in redemption is the resurrection and exaltation of the Christ. The New
Testament itself identifies this event as that which corresponds to the establishing of the Davidic rule and the temple. This in no way should be seen as depreciating the importance of the cross. The cross presupposes that the suffering servant-messiah will be vindicated. The resurrection presupposes the death on the cross, so that it is the suffering servant-messiah who is raised and vindicated (justified).

v. The gospel shapes the NT view of how the kingdom of God comes with the tension of the 'now' and the 'not yet'
The NT proclaims that the kingdom of God foreshadowed in OT history and promised in prophecy has come in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the kingdom of God. Part of the tension in the NT is the perception that Jesus of Nazareth does not fulfil the expectations of the Jews which they saw as the implications of the OT promises. Even the disciples found it hard to grasp that the Christ should suffer and then enter into his glory (Luke 24:25–27). Once again it is the gospel which shapes the NT view of the coming of the kingdom. What is often spoken of as the tension between the 'now' and the 'not yet' is a function of the way God brings in his kingdom. Since the kingdom comes with Jesus, we see the coming of the kingdom in the coming of Jesus, and the manner of its coming depends on the manner of Jesus' coming. In his first coming he is revealed as the last Adam, the seed of Abraham, the faithful Israel, the son of David. In his resurrection he, as the covenant-keeper, is justified and accepted into the eternal presence of the Father. This representative and substitutionary role of Jesus only touches others if the kingdom somehow comes to them also. This happens with the coming of the exalted Christ in his word and by his Spirit. Those who are united to him by faith find that they now experience the kingdom tension in themselves. They are in the kingdom in their representative, but in themselves they are strangers and pilgrims in the world. The resolution of the tension is promised in the return of Jesus in glory to consummate universally what is already a reality in him.

vi. Towards a definition of biblical theology
It can now be suggested that what we mean by biblical theology is the theology as it is presented in the Bible within the historical process of progressive revelation. It is structured by the way the biblical authors did theology, and in particular by the gospel as it is expounded in terms of Jesus of Nazareth being the goal and fulfilment of redemptive history in the OT. Biblical theology seeks to understand the 'big picture' of divine revelation. It is difficult to state a concise working definition which will find general acceptance.45 Much depends on the stance taken and the assumptions made. In the light of our discussion we might propose the following: biblical theology is the study of the gospel in the context of its antecedents and its effects as these are set out in the whole canon of Scripture.

vii. The question of a centre or controlling theme in biblical theology
One final matter in the question of the viability of biblical theology needs to be mentioned. Much has been written about the attempts to identify a single unifying theme or centre for a biblical theology. The very endeavour, of course, assumes that there is some essential unity to the theology of the whole Bible. For an evangelical this means something like accepting that the Bible is the one word of the one God about the one way of salvation. But even some conservative writers who accept in

44 We might note that Jesus' use of Psalm 22:1 is not an isolated verse as a cry of despair. He had declared that he had power both to lay down his life and to take it again (John 10:18). The psalmist expressed both suffering in the face of persecution and the confidence that he would be vindicated, for which he praises God. I suggest that Jesus maintained the confidence of eventual vindication even in the face of his suffering. Thus he can say to the thief, 'Today you will be with me in paradise'.

45 Following the presentation of these papers at the School of Theology, these definitions were suggested by Richard Blight, a student at Moore College:

i. Biblical theology is the study of the main theme or themes of the Bible and the way that they are presented and developed in the Scriptures. It then involves the study of how the various parts of the Bible relate to this theme or themes.

ii. Biblical theology is the study of the theme or themes which establish the unity and coherence of the Bible. It also involves the study of how the various parts of the Bible relate to this theme or themes.
principle the unity of the Bible question the attempts to express this unity in terms of one theme.

The kingdom of God as the organising principle

I have no doubt that my own attempt to identify a unifying theme in the notion of the kingdom of God was largely influenced by John Bright's book of that name. Charles Scobie has criticised my choice because the term primarily occurs in the synoptic gospels and nowhere in the OT. But it is difficult to see the force of his objection, since he concedes that major themes can be identified by a more general expression such as the 'rule of God'. Mostly, the rejection of such an approach seems to reflect a nervousness about imposing an artificial unity on the Bible. But caution about artificial schemes should not divert us from recognising the implications of both the canon and the gospel for the unity of the Bible.

The need to distinguish terms, themes, and theological concepts

It appears that we need to differentiate between a word or phrase (such as God, or kingdom of God), a theme (such as temple, or redemption), and the theological principle which might underlie such words or themes. In reply to Scobie, use of kingdom of God is one of legitimate reductionism and theological abstraction, not an attempt to identify the synoptic use of the term in every part of the Bible. Not only would I suggest that the rule of God and the kingdom of God are equally useful for the purpose, but that what we are looking for is the theological underpinning for the entire biblical message, not merely a theme that runs the length of the biblical story.

A multi-themed approach is viable

Scobie seems to miss the point that, according to the synoptics, Jesus begins his ministry (Mark 1:14,15) with a reference to the kingdom of God as the fulfilment. Jesus implies that this has meaning for the Jews who are oriented to the OT scriptures. It is clearly not the term as such but the theological concept that Jesus refers to. Scobie proposes a multi-themed approach to doing biblical theology. I have employed such an approach in According to Plan, where alongside the theme of the kingdom of God is placed the theme of creation and new creation, and also the wisdom-oriented theme of order and regeneration of order.

A multi-themed approach still needs a unifying principle

A multi-themed approach only makes sense if there is some identifiable theological theme or concept which underlies all themes. If we cannot assume this we have no basis for asserting the theological unity of the Bible. It is at this level that the interaction of biblical and systematic theology is most fruitful. Thus when the term 'kingdom of God' is proposed as the theological centre of the Bible it is in a conceptual and reductionist way. The biblical literature, as literature, does not easily yield a centre. But the biblical revelation, as revelation, does provide us with a base to work from into every text of the Bible and towards a unified biblical theology. The reason it is not helpful to make 'God' the unifying principle is that it needs definition by the gospel and does not account for the biblical distinction between God and his creation. We need another more explicit base.

All themes lead to the gospel of the kingdom

This base is the gospel which is the message that the sovereign creator Lord God has made all things for himself and has acted in redemptive history, which centres in Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection, in order to restore all things to their appointed place under his rule. To those evangelical theologians who doubt the viability of such a unified biblical theology and who adopt the multiple theologies approach, as well as a multiple


theme approach, I have but one question: if all these diverse theologies and themes do not point to and centre in the real Christ of all history, to the dying, rising and exalted Christ, where in heaven or earth do they point?

Exploring further

1. Some older biblical theologies were criticised for being merely a process of proof-texting existing dogmatics. Do you think biblical theology can, or even should, function in this way?

2. How would you defend a presuppositional approach to the authority and unity of the Bible? Should such a basic defence be taught to young Christians?

3. Consider the view that biblical theology is indispensable to the proper interpretation of the Bible.

4. How would you relate the predominant salvation-history in the Bible to the theology of creation and to the wisdom literature?

5. What kind of relationship exists between biblical theology and Christian doctrine?