

Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective

D. A. CARSON
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Biblical theology can be defined in a number of ways, corresponding in large measure with the diversity of ways in which the practice of biblical theology has developed since the expression was coined almost four centuries ago. In the taxonomy of definitions, the most useful entries are those that stress the distinctiveness of individual biblical corpora, while pressing towards a "gesamtbiblische Theologie." The conditions necessary for preparing such biblical theology are here articulated, and contemporary challenges to biblical theology are briefly classified and probed.

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Like apple pie, biblical theology is something most people find difficult to oppose (though there are always a few who dislike the taste); unlike apple pie, biblical theology is rather difficult to define. To talk about "Current Issues in Biblical Theology" presupposes an agreed discipline whose current issues can be identified and discussed. In reality, no small part of the "current issues" stem, in this instance, from uncertainty about the status of the discipline.

An excellent starting point is the pair of learned articles, published two years ago in *Tyndale Bulletin*¹ by our colleague Charles Scobie and reduced to more popular form in a single article in *Themelios*.² Scobie focuses on the historical development of biblical theology, before advancing his own sensible proposals. One might

1. Charles H. H. Scobie, "The Challenge of Biblical Theology," *TynBul Bulletin* 42 (1991) 3-30; Scobie, "The Structure of Biblical Theology," *TynBul* 42 (1991) 163-94.

2. Scobie, "New Directions in Biblical Theology," *Themelios* 17/2 (Jan-Feb, 1992) 4-8.

also usefully consult the spotted history of the discipline in the first part of Brevard Childs's latest opus.³ Because so many of the crucial issues turn at least in some measure on one's understanding of the relationship between the Testaments, the second edition of David Baker's book is also profitable reading.⁴ A host of other historical surveys is available.⁵

While not ignoring the historical development of biblical theology, I shall deal with the subject somewhat more topically. I shall (1) begin by outlining the principal competing definitions of biblical theology, (2) elucidate the essential components of an approach to biblical theology that I judge viable, and (3) wind up by sketching the contemporary challenges of biblical theology.

I. COMPETING DEFINITIONS OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Different approaches to biblical theology may be analyzed in several ways. What follows is simply one useful breakdown. The definitions are not all mutually exclusive (i.e., some biblical theologians implicitly adopt more than one of the following definitions). Nevertheless, the distinctions are heuristically useful, because other biblical theologians will put asunder what their colleagues, if not God himself, have joined together. Moreover, we shall see that there are several subcategories lurking under most of these definitions.

(1) *Biblical theology is to be identified with systematic or dogmatic theology.* This was the assumption, of course, before two or three centuries ago. It would be the height of arrogance to argue that before the end of the seventeenth or the beginning of the eighteenth century the church knew nothing of biblical theology. If one has a canon of books (*biblia*) on the basis of which one seeks to develop a theology, one is constructing a "biblical" theology in *some* sense. As Scobie rightly insists, "The most basic problem of biblical theology in any age is that of reconciling the desire for a uniform and consistent set of beliefs with the manifest diversity of the Bible."⁶ Whether the church developed the classic fourfold sense of Scripture, or (as in post-Reformation Protestantism) compiled its lists of *dicta probantia*

3. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 3-51.

4. David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible: A Study of the Theological Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (rev. ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991).

5. E.g., H.-J. Kraus, *Die biblische Theologie: Ihre Geschichte und Problematik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970); W. Harrington, *The Path of Biblical Theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973); H. G. Reventlow, *Problems of Biblical Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); James Smart, *The Past, Present and Future of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979); M. Oeming, *Gesamt-biblische Theologie der Gegenwart* (2d ed.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987).

6. Scobie, "New Directions," 4.

to support its doctrine, it was trying not only to make sense of the Bible in all its diversity but also to display its univocal message. Indeed, the first known use of the expression "biblical theology" referred to just such a list of proof-texts.⁷ It is altogether appropriate, then, that we acknowledge that biblical theology has been with us as long as reflection on Scripture has been with us. But it is also true to say that in this lengthy period before the rise of modern historical consciousness, the church did not make two distinctions that most of us now take to be axiomatic. First, the church did not then clearly articulate a distinction between church doctrine, dogmatic theology if you will, and biblical theology. To articulate the latter was to prescribe the former. Second, the church did not then clearly articulate a distinction between biblical theology and systematic theology. This does not mean that the church could not distinguish between "before" and "after," between earlier and later biblical books, between Old and New Testaments. It means, rather, that the solutions it advanced to make the Bible say one thing tended to be logical and systematic, i.e., atemporal, rather than integrally dependent on the Bible's developing story line forged across time.

This first definition of biblical theology is not restricted to the period before 1700. Karl Barth's dogmatic theology can be understood as a biblical theology that is in violent reaction against the historical criticism and theological reductionism of his day. In a recent essay drawing on Bernard Lonergan, A. James Reimer argues that biblical and systematic theology are not disjunctive disciplines but functional specialties within the discipline of Christian theology.⁸

Perhaps we may extend this definition of biblical theology to include Ben C. Ollenburger, who does not equate biblical and systematic theology, but who argues that the distinction between them is of little importance. Picking up a phrase from Jeffrey Stout, he places both biblical and systematic theology within the "logical space of normative discourse," both disciplines instances of "the church's self-critical discursive practice."⁹ It is not that Ollenburger cannot distinguish between biblical and systematic theology, nor even that he thinks there is a danger of the former collapsing into the latter. Rather, he holds that the distinction is not essential.¹⁰ Biblical theology, he contends, arose because systematic theology was sacrificing

7. W. J. Christmann, *Teutsche biblische Theologie*, published in 1629. There is no extant copy. I am indebted to Scobie for this information ("Challenge," 32-33).

8. A. James Reimer, "Biblical and Systematic Theology as Functional Specialties: Their Distinction and Relation," *So Wide a Sea: Essays on Biblical and Systematic Theology* (ed. Ben C. Ollenburger; Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1991) 37-58.

9. "Biblical and Systematic Theology: Constructing a Relation," *So Wide a Sea*, 111-45; and the Preface, p. ix.

10. *Ibid.* 132.

its persuasiveness in the arena of normative discourse. In the hands of some practitioners, biblical theology may repeat the error. What is critical is the normative discourse. If biblical and systematic theology each maintains some distinctiveness so as to correct and challenge the other to make a more telling contribution to the church's "normative discourse," well and good; but distinctions between the disciplines have no interest for Ollenburger beyond this functional value.

(2) *Biblical theology is the theology of the whole Bible, descriptively and historically considered.* Both adverbs are important: "descriptively" suggests inductive study of the biblical texts, and a generally closer connection to the Bible than is usually reflected in systematic theology; "historically" disavows the primarily logical and atemporal categories that are customarily the provenance of systematic theology and promises to read the biblical texts in their historical settings and sequence. It is important to remember the route to this stance. In the first instance it was fed by dissatisfaction with the prevailing Protestant orthodoxy of the eighteenth century. This dissatisfaction ultimately bred three forms of "biblical theology" (within the framework of this second definition):

First, rationalism, the stepchild of English Deism and the German *Aufklärung*, fostered a number of "biblical theologies" in the 1770s and 1780s, in which the aim was to extract from the Bible timeless truths in accord with Reason, truths that would correct the orthodoxy of contemporary systematic theology.¹¹ Gabler's famous 1787 inaugural address at the University of Altdorf was thus not as groundbreaking as some have thought,¹² but his title captured the rising mood: in English translation, "An Oration on the Proper Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each."¹³ Dogmatic theology, Gabler charges, is convoluted, disputed, changing, and too far removed from the Bible: biblical theology has much more hope of gaining univocal structure

11. In particular, K. F. Bahrtdt, *Versuch eines biblischen Systems der Dogmatik* (2 vols.; Gotha: Heinsius, 1769-70); G. T. Zachariä, *Biblische Theologie, oder Untersuchung des biblischen Grundes der vornehmsten theologischen Lehren* (5 vols.; Tübingen: Frank und Schramm, 1771-86).

12. Johann P. Gabler, "Oratio de iusto discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus," *Kleinere theologische Schriften* (vol. 2, ed. T. A. Gabler and J. G. Gabler; Ulm: Verlag des Stettinischen Buchhandlung, 1831) 179-98.

13. The English translation became available in J. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction Between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary and Discussion of His Originality," *SJT* 33 (1980) 133-58. The translation apart from the commentary has been reprinted in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology, 1930-1990* (ed. Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992) 492-502.

among godly, learned, and cautious theologians. From this biblical theology, systematic theology may then properly be constructed. It is worth pointing out that at this juncture biblical theology makes its overt appeal *not* on the ground that the Bible is a collection of historical documents that must be read historically (though that is implicit in some of what Gabler says) but *rather* on the ground that as a descriptive enterprise biblical theology is less speculative, less difficult, more enduring, and more frankly biblical than the orthodox dogmatics of the day.

Second, about the same time German Pietism was appealing to the Bible, against the prevailing orthodoxy, for spiritual nourishment. As much as a century earlier, Spener (1635-1705) distinguished biblical theology (*theologia biblica*—that is, his) from scholastic theology (*theologia scholastica*—that is, the prevailing orthodoxy).¹⁴

Third, a number of contemporary scholars, more or less conservative, work, implicitly, under the aegis of this definition. We should remind ourselves how this came about. Under the impact of the historical-critical method, scholars in the eighteenth century became more and more aware of the historical dimensions of the Bible. Most practitioners of historical criticism became so radical in the distinctions they drew that they could no longer speak of biblical theology along the lines of this second definition. Their work tended toward a distinction between Old Testament theology and New Testament theology, followed by more and more refinements until one had endless theologies but certainly no *biblical* theology—i.e., a theology of the entire Bible. The new definition that emerged in such circles I shall consider in a moment. But others maintained some form of our second definition. By far the most influential was Johann Ch. K. Hoffmann. Even though what he wrote was a New Testament theology,¹⁵ the framework of his thought was biblical theology in this second sense. The commitment to write "whole Bible" biblical theology can still be traced in this century. One thinks not only of the seminal work by Vos,¹⁶ but of several more recent contributions. Van Gemeren's work is largely structured around what he judges to be the turning points in the Bible's story line.¹⁷ Van Groningen's massive study is essentially an analysis of the theme of messiahship in the Old Testament, transparently moving to Jesus

14. For references and discussion, cf. G. Ebeling, "The Meaning of Biblical Theology," *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) 84.

15. Johann Ch. K. Hoffmann, *Biblishe Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Nördlingen: Beck, 1886). His influence on Schlatter was significant.

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

17. Willem Van Gemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan-Academie, 1988).

the Messiah, but the study is largely structured to follow the progress of the Bible's story line, read at face value.¹⁸ Fuller's latest book seeks to set out *The Unity of the Bible*.¹⁹ At a more popular level, one thinks of some of the work of Goldsworthy.²⁰ Similarly, some recent German discussion focuses on the desirability of "eine gesamt-biblische Theologie."²¹ Scobie's insistence that biblical theology is properly an intermediate discipline between a narrowly historical study of the Bible, on the one hand, and systematic theology, on the other,²² shares something of Gabler's perspective. It seems to me that at many levels the best forms of canonical theology also belong under this second definition of biblical theology, even if their rationale has some independent features.²³

Reflecting on this second definition of biblical theology, I cannot refrain from citing a lengthy and insightful passage in Warfield, to which Richard Lints has recently drawn attention.²⁴ Warfield, Lints says, suggests that the distinctively

new discipline of "biblical theology" came to us indeed wrapped in the swaddling clothes of rationalism and it was rocked in the cradle of the Hegelian recasting of Christianity; it did not present at first, therefore, a very engaging countenance and seemed to find for a time its pleasure in setting the prophets and apostles by the ears. But already in the hands of men like Schmid and Oehler it began to show that it was born to better things. And now as it grows to a more mature form and begins to overtake the tasks that belong to its adulthood, it bids fair to mark a new era in theological investigation by making known to us the revelation of God genetically—that is, by laying it before us in the stages of its growth and its several stadia of development. If men have hitherto been content to contemplate the counsel of the Most High only in its final state—laid out before them as it were, in a map—hereafter it seems that they are to consider it by preference in its stages, in its vital processes of growth and maturing. Obviously a much higher form of knowledge is thus laid open to us; and were this

18. Gerard Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

19. Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

20. E.g., G. Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1991).

21. Cf. Oeming, *Gesamt-biblische Theologie der Gegenwart*.

22. Especially in his *Tyndale Bulletin* articles, already cited.

23. The most important work here is that of Childs, *Biblical Theology*.

24. Richard Lints, "Two Theologies or One? Warfield and Vos on the Nature of Theology," *WTJ* 54 (1992) 235-53, esp pp. 252-53, referring to Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Century's Progress in Biblical Knowledge," usefully reprinted in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (ed. Richard Gaffin; Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970) 2.12 from an original in *Homiletic Review* 39 (1900) 195-201, esp 200-201.

discipline the sole gift of the 19th century to the Christian student, she would by it alone have made good a claim on his permanent gratitude.

(3) *Biblical theology is the theology of various biblical corpora or strata.*

This third definition, as we have just seen, developed from the second. The more scholars worked at a merely descriptive level, with no concern or responsibility to synthesize and describe what is normative, the more the diversities in the biblical material achieved prominence. The first and most obvious division is that between the Testaments. As early as 1796 the first Old Testament theology was produced, followed a few years later by the first New Testament theology.²⁵ Although *biblical* theologies—that is, theologies of the entire Bible, definition #2—continued to be written for the next half century, the project was largely abandoned in the second half of the nineteenth century. Even conservative scholars could manage no more than Old Testament or New Testament theologies, which of course are not at all "biblical" by the light of the second definition—even though some of the writers of these "one Testament" theologies worked within a conceptual framework that allowed for "whole Bible" biblical theology (e.g., Hoffmann, as we have seen). Still, the move was toward the part, not the whole. We are thus forced back to the third definition.

By the end of the nineteenth century the most influential biblical theologians (if we may call them that) were not engaging in much more than history-of-religions parallelomania (to use Sandmel's famous neologism). The corpora being studied were smaller and smaller: one could not, it was argued, responsibly speak of New Testament or Old Testament theology (let alone biblical theology): the Old Testament, for instance, includes many disparate theologies. Witness the marvelous cynicism betrayed in W. Wrede's most famous title on this subject: *Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten neutestamentlichen Theologie*.²⁶ This is what Scobie calls "a completely independent Biblical Theology"—that is, independent of any acknowledged Christian dogmatic presuppositions, of any concern to seek out what is normative or even helpful for the Christian church.²⁷ For some decades biblical theology largely self-destructed.

The rise of the so-called biblical theology movement turned the clock back by generating many Old Testament and New Testament theologies (third definition). Some of these have been so influential that their principal ideas have been recycled and modified in more

25. G. L. Bauer, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Leipzig: Weygand, 1796); Bauer, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Weygand, 1800-1802).

26. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1897.

27. Scobie, "Challenge," 39.

recent works. For instance, Eichrodt's Old Testament theology centered on the notion of the covenant,²⁸ and some of its main theses have been defended or adapted by Roger Beckwith.²⁹ Despite the fact that the biblical theology movement had its obituaries prepared by several scholars, especially Childs,³⁰ theologies of the Old and New Testaments continue to appear with fair regularity. Some of these, like the very recent work by Preuss,³¹ still choose a central or organizing theme (in his case, election). New Testament theologies, however, with only rare exceptions, organize their material almost exclusively according to corpus. Neither approach is a *biblical* ("gesamt-biblische") theology in the second sense; both approaches generate biblical theologies only in the third sense. But the latter, common in the New Testament theologies, may actually magnify the diversity of the New Testament corpora, or purport to discover only the thinnest lines of theological connection among those corpora. One thinks of Dunn's suggestion that what holds together the christological perspectives of the New Testament documents is nothing more than the shared conviction that the pre-passion Jesus and the post-resurrection Jesus are one and the same.³² In the so-called new Tübingen school, Gese and Stuhlmacher hew an independent path. Gese argues that in the time of Jesus and of the writers of the New Testament there was still no closed Old Testament canon. Therefore biblical theology must be understood to deal with the process of tradition viewed as a whole—not with earlier forms, or later forms, or canonical forms.³³ Similarly, Stuhlmacher, using the law as a sample topic appropriate to this notion of biblical theology, traces developing and quite differing concepts of law through both Testaments.³⁴ In still more skeptical guise, a New Testament theology may not only high-

28. Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, ET 1961-1967).

29. Roger T. Beckwith, "The Unity and Diversity of God's Covenants," *TynBul* 38 (1987) 93-118.

30. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

31. Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*. Vol. 1: *JHWH's erwählendes und verpflichtendes Handeln* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1991).

32. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977). Cf. my "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," *Scripture and Truth* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983; repr. Baker, 1992) 61-95.

33. H. Gese, *Essays on Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981).

34. R. Stuhlmacher, "The Law as a Topic of Biblical Theology," *Reconciliation, Law and Righteousness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 110-33. For a more rigorous and thorough treatment of the move from Jesus to Paul, focusing on but not restricting itself to the law, see his important *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*. Band I. *Grundlegung: Von Jesus zu Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1992).

light disjunctions among the New Testament corpora, but find unbearable tensions ostensibly generated by developments even within a particular corpus: one thinks, for instance, of the two volumes that have appeared so far in Hans Hübner's *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*.³⁵

Conservative New Testament theologies, though not nearly as skeptical and disjunctive as Hübner, nonetheless belong under this third definition of biblical theology. The influential contribution of Ladd, for instance, proceeds by analyzing the theology of each New Testament corpus;³⁶ there is little attempt at integration. The one major exception, the work by Guthrie,³⁷ does not really solve the problem. Instead of working inductively from each New Testament corpus, Guthrie selects a very wide range of New Testament themes and tracks them down in each New Testament corpus, but there is no final attempt at integration. And in any case, the outer boundary is the New Testament, not the Bible.

The remaining three definitions may be introduced more briefly:

(4) *Biblical theology is the theology of a particular theme across the Scriptures—or at least across the corpora of a Testament.* One thinks, for instance, of the recent essay by Elmer Martens, "Embracing the Law: A Biblical Theological Perspective,"³⁸ or some of the essays by Hartmut Gese.³⁹ What makes his study a "biblical theological" enterprise is that he pursues his chosen theme through the main biblical corpora. One thinks, too, of some of the provocative essays in the recent collection by Moberly.⁴⁰

Once again, however, there are several subcategories. The topic or theme selected may be one that is directly treated by a large number of biblical corpora—as is the case in Martens's study. Alternatively, the topics may arise out of the categories of systematic theology—self-evidently the case in much of Millar Burrow's 1946 "biblical theology."⁴¹ The problem becomes still more acute when well-meaning Christians seek to determine "the Bible's view on X"—where X may or may not be something that the Bible regularly

35. Vol. 1, *Prolegomena*; Vol. 2, *Die Theologie des Paulus und ihre neutestamentliche Wirkungsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1990-1993).

36. George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

37. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: InverVarsity, 1981).

38. *BBR* 2 (1992) 1-28

39. Those most conveniently available in English are found in his *Essays on Biblical Theology* (trans. Keith Crim; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981).

40. R. W. L. Moberly, *From Eden to Golgotha: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

41. Millard Burrows, *An Outline of Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946).

addressed, but which is on the current agenda of disputed matters. I shall return to this form of "biblical theology" in the last section of the paper.

(5) *Biblical theology is the theology that arises out of "narrative theology" or related literary-critical reading of the Bible.* One thinks on the one hand of Hans Frei's insistence that our hermeneutical difficulties stem from our post-Enlightenment, post-Reformation insistence on reading the Bible referentially, instead of as a narrative;⁴² one thinks, too, of George Lindbeck's suggestion that an appropriate "cultural-linguistic" approach views religion as a cultural-linguistic framework that controls life and thought.⁴³ These and related approaches tend to focus on one biblical corpus or part of a corpus at a time. More importantly, they so focus on narrative itself, or on the "cultural-linguistic" framework, that it is largely irrelevant whether or not the biblical texts are believably referential. That is also the strength and weakness of Moberly's essays, to which reference has been made: in his efforts to reconcile liberals and conservatives, he attempts a *via media*, frequently appealing to genres (though rarely does he ground his appeal in close comparative work). In my view, neither can escape the strictures Sternberg imposes: "Were the biblical narratives written or read as fiction, then God would turn from the lord of history into a creature of the imagination with the most disastrous results. . . . Hence the Bible's determination to sanctify and compel literal belief in the past."⁴⁴

(6) *Biblical theology is simply the results of serious study of any part or parts of the Bible.* I am thinking, for instance, of the titles of the recent books by I. Howard Marshall and by Josef Blank: *Jesus the Savior: Studies in New Testament Theology*, and *Studien zur biblischen Theologie*.⁴⁵ Both of these volumes consist of collected essays, most of which have little to do with any form of biblical theology discussed up to this point. The essays are called "biblical theology" or "New Testament theology" for no apparant reason other than that they are the fruit of serious study of some passage or theme or other in the designated corpus.

42. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

43. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

44. M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1985) 32.

45. I. Howard Marshall, *Jesus the Savior; Studies in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990); Josef Blank, *Studien zur biblischen Theologie* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992).

II. STANCES ESSENTIAL TO BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

My comments on the competing definitions of biblical theology just sketched in will emerge in this section.

At one level, there cannot be a "right" or "wrong" definition of biblical theology. There is neither a stable, longstanding tradition of the use of the expression to which one might refer, nor an array of biblical passages that utilize the expression. Everyone is free to use the expression as he or she sees fit. But to foster clarity of thought, the expression "biblical theology" would gain in usefulness if we restricted its deployment such that at least the following things could be said of it:

(1) Unembarrassed by the rise of modern historical consciousness, *biblical theology is a discipline necessarily dependent on reading the Bible as an historically developing collection of documents*. Although there are a few holdouts, this point is now widely recognized, even among people with a variety of theological perspectives. Several decades ago Ladd insisted: "The entire Bible finds its unity in what can best be called holy history—*Heilsgeschichte*."⁴⁶ The point can of course be made without appeal to the disputed term *Heilsgeschichte*.⁴⁷ Thus Terrien, for all his insistence that biblical theology is "indissolubly married to biblical spirituality,"⁴⁸ nevertheless concedes that it is a "historical discipline which seeks to elucidate the meaning of the Bible itself."⁴⁹ In other words, in contemporary usage the first definition I provided (above), should be ruled out: biblical theology is not to be identified with systematic theology.

(2) In any really useful sense of the expression, *biblical theology must presuppose a coherent and agreed canon*. At a purely pedantic level, it is obvious scholars must agree what the *biblia* are before they can agree what biblical theology is. The question posed in a recent title, *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament?*,⁵⁰ reflects at least communitarian interest. In fact, there are two components to this observation, and the two are interrelated: (a) Extent of the canon. One cannot construct a biblical theology of the *entire* Bible (second definition, above) if one cannot decide how big the Bible is, and what is in it. (b) Nature of the

46. George E. Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 10-11.

47. Though the term has been taken up by another recent writer: cf. Robert Gnuse, *Heilsgeschichte as a Model for Biblical Theology* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989).

48. S. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: The Heart of Biblical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 42.

49. *Ibid.* 39.

50. Roger Brooks and John J. Collins, ed., *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament? Studying the Bible in Judaism and Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

canon. The Bible must be recognized as a *canon* in more than an accidental, historical sense. If one holds that the limits of the canon were established by accidental historical processes in the early centuries of the church, such that there was nothing intrinsic to the books themselves that brought about these decisions, then the canon must be judged arbitrary. One may, I suppose, assign it to some general providence and, in a leap of faith, decide to accept this providential arrangement and work within the confines of these *biblia*. But one must, in that case, concede that another list could have been feasible and that there is nothing intrinsic to the books in the present canon to warrant the supposition that they really can be linked in a coherent biblical theology (second definition). In that case we are forced to adopt a definition of biblical theology that is third or lower on my list. To adopt the second definition, which alone warrants "eine gesamt-biblische Theologies," presupposes that the books that constitute the canon are of such a nature that the endeavor is possible.⁵¹ In short, biblical theology, so understood, presupposes a coherent and agreed

51. When this paper was first read (at the 1993 annual meeting of IBR), some discussion turned on whether the view of canon implicitly adopted here is a "definitional presupposition" (i.e., no more than a working hypothesis) or a "metaphysical hypothesis" (i.e., an assumption not open to inquiry). Quite apart from whether "definitional" and "metaphysical" are the best terms to designate the two kinds of assumption, I doubt that the sharp antithesis is helpful. My interlocutor insisted that if the assumption is "definitional," then we must handle the texts in such a way that the canon remains *provisionally* open: every generation must wrestle afresh with the question of canon. But the sharpness of the antithesis is demanding extreme conclusions. Even a "metaphysical" assumption can be changed: people can and do change their world views, rejecting one metaphysic for another. Conversely, a "working hypothesis" is not necessarily something that one must constantly be tempted to place in abeyance! To take an example from another area of Christian thought: Confessional believers hold to the deity of Jesus the Messiah, regardless of how sophisticated the form of the expression may be. Most come to hold this as a "given," a functional non-negotiable: i.e., in theory they acknowledge that this confession is open to doubt; moreover they know some people who have changed their minds on precisely this issue; nevertheless, for most believers this credal point is so stable that it *functions* as a non-negotiable in most of their work, and thus (rightly) ensures that their work on some points will be cast in a certain way. It would be presumptuous to demand that such believers, because they acknowledge (in theory at least) that this belief *could* change, must constantly treat the matter as provisionally open. (It is a different matter, of course, if a believer chooses to treat this belief as open for the sake of an argument.) True, every generation must wrestle with such matters afresh, precisely because every generation must, ideally, find at least some persons who study the primary evidence for themselves to ensure that the belief is not *merely* secondhand tradition. Even so, it remains a great comfort to recognize that a belief drawn from the primary documents is in line with the central tradition of the church. In exactly the same way, I would argue that the approach to the canon assumed in this paper can be defended in considerable detail, and that it *should* function as a non-negotiable in most related discussion undertaken by a confessional believer.

canon.⁵² I do not myself see how such a stance is possible without a fairly sophisticated notion of revelation.

(3) *Such biblical theology as I envisage presupposes a profound willingness to work inductively from the text—from individual books and from the canon as a whole.* The significance of this observation will be clearer if I briefly contrast biblical theology with systematic theology. The latter, we have seen, asks and answers primarily atemporal questions. In some measure it deals with the categories established by historical theology; at the same time its priorities and agenda are carefully constructed so as, ideally, to address the contemporary age at the most crucial junctures. This means, *inter alia*, that it often includes material at a second or third or fourth order of remove from Scripture, as it engages, say, philosophical and scientific questions not directly raised by the biblical texts themselves. These elements constitute part of its legitimate mandate.

Not so biblical theology. It is deeply committed to working inductively from the biblical text; the text itself sets the agenda. This is not of course to suggest that any biblical theologian can ever escape his or her limitations, self-identity, place in culture and history, and so forth—I shall shortly tip my hat in the direction of the new hermeneutic. But a biblical theologian, whether working on, say, the Pauline corpus, or on the entire canon, must in the first instance seek to deploy categories and pursue an agenda set by the text itself.

Contrast the stances adopted in two recent essays. Bornemann sets forth an approach to biblical theology that takes its cues not from dogmatics but from "basic religious questions" with which life confronts us.⁵³ How these "basic religious questions" are chosen or delineated is not altogether clear. Tribble goes farther. She argues that feminist interpreters should find incentive in engaging in biblical theology despite the Bible's patriarchal stance: they should adopt

52. Doubtless the related question of the "canon within the canon" could be raised here. If the postulate of such a "canon within the canon" is merely an empirical observation (i.e., many believers actually operate that way), *while in principle this approach is always correctable by appeal to the entire canon*, then the postulate, though doubtless accurate, is more or less trite. On the other hand, if one actively defends the rightness of some theory or other of a "canon within the canon," then *de facto* it is the smaller canon that is the *real* canon—and all the historical and theological questions must be addressed afresh. Incidentally, the old saw that no Christian keeps all the Old Testament laws, and therefore all Christians do in fact operate with a "canon within the canon," though frequently trotted out, must be dismissed as remarkably ignorant both of the nature of canon in historical discussion, and of the nature of biblical theology.

53. Robert Bornemann, "Toward a Biblical Theology," *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology* (ed. John Reumann; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 117-28.

ketib-qere interpretive tactics to overthrow this biblical patriarchy.⁵⁴ In neither case is there any commitment to begin with and be controlled by the text; there is every evidence of a desire to domesticate the text by making it subservient to extrabiblical agendas. This is not to say that the Bible does not address our "basic religious questions" (whatever they are) or feminist concerns. It is to say, rather, that such categories may be deployed in biblical theology worthy of the name only to the extent that they play their role in the text. The proposals of Bornemann and Tribble are not biblical theology under the first, second, third, fourth, or fifth designations; they barely make it under the sixth.

(4) It follows from what I have said that ideally *biblical theology will not only work inductively in each of the biblical corpora but will seek to make clear the connections among the corpora*. In other words, it is committed to intertextual study, not simply because as an accident of history some texts depend on others and it is worth sorting out those dependencies, but because *biblical* theology, at its most coherent, is a theology of the *Bible*.

In an essay published ten years ago,⁵⁵ I likened the Bible to a gigantic jigsaw puzzle in which certain instructions are given. The manufacturer stipulates that all the pieces belong to the one puzzle, but that quite a few pieces are missing. Poor puzzle players will try to ram all the pieces together to make one tight picture; frustrated or skeptical players will walk away from the puzzle, disappointed or disgusted because they cannot fill in the holes; and even some who disbelieve the manufacturer's instructions will make some wonderful contributions to the task of putting the puzzle together.

My analogy served its purpose at the time. In one respect, however, it is woefully inadequate. It conjures up an image of all the pieces fitting together on the same flat plane. It would be closer to the mark to imagine the same instructions with a gigantic three-dimensional puzzle, or, better yet, multi-dimensional puzzle beyond the third dimension. The Bible is written in different languages; it is composed of different genres (the content is not conveyed the same way in lament, apocalyptic, wisdom, and law); it reflects many idioms ("to call" does not mean the same thing in Matthew and in Paul). Some parts relate to each other as complements; other parts relate to each other as promise and fulfillment. Approach a puzzle

54. Phyllis Tribble, "Five Loaves and Two Fishes: Feminist Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, 51-70.

55. D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: On the Possibility of Systematic Theology," *Scripture and Truth* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 61-95.

with this many dimensions and it is quite easy to be a poor puzzle player—the more so if (though it is a subject I cannot now explore) some players ignore the manufacturer's insistence that puzzle players should have certain qualifications.

The multidimensional nature of the Bible is always borne in mind by the better biblical theologians, whether or not it is discussed in precisely these terms. Thus N. T. Wright, in the inaugural volume of his projected five-volume set,⁵⁶ insists that the New Testament be interpreted within the framework of the Bible's "story" in five acts: creation, fall, Israel, Jesus, the writing of the New Testament. This interpretation, he says, must bring together history, theology, and literary sensibilities. One might analyze the interpretive components slightly differently, or trace the Bible's story line in more detail, but the essential point remains the same: ideally, biblical theology will not only work inductively in each of the biblical corpora, but will seek to make clear the connections among the corpora, remembering all the while the complexity of the documents, the multidimensional nature of the synthesis we seek.⁵⁷

(5) *Ideally, biblical theology will transcend mere description and linking of the biblical documents, and call men and women to knowledge of the living God.* The point has been made in several ways. Terrien's work majors on this theme, though in my view at the unfortunate expense of some others.⁵⁸ Ollenburger, as we have seen, insists that both biblical and systematic theology must contribute to "the logical space of normative discourse"—that is, to the sphere where there is an explicit or implicit "ought" and revelatory authority: these things we *ought* to believe and do. In a recent essay, McConville insists that biblical theology must embrace an "existential element."⁵⁹ By this he means that Old Testament theology must not only discern the story line of the text, and the forward movement of expectation, but also recognize that the people described in the text experienced the "nowness" of God. They did not invariably recognize the great forward movement; they rejoiced in, or rebelled against, or trusted, or

56. Norman T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 1992).

57. Conversely, of course, if one holds that appropriate historical-critical exegesis yields entirely incompatible theologies, then real synthesis is impossible, and so is any historic understanding of canon. The problems are reflected upon, though not always in a penetrating way, in Armin Sierszyn, *Die Bibel im Griff? Historisch-kritische Denkweise und biblische Theologie* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1978).

58. Terrien, *Elusive Presence*.

59. J. G. McConville, "Using Scripture for Theology: Unity and Diversity in Old Testament Theology," *The Challenge of Evangelical Theology: Essays in Approach and Method* (ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron; Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1987) 39-57. esp. 55-56.

disobeyed, the disclosure of God. God's self-disclosure does not only call forth structure and synthetic thought; it calls forth experience. Similarly, our biblical theology must not only reflect structure, storyline, corpus theology, and the like; it must also capture this existential element, and thereby call a new generation to personal knowledge of the living God.

III. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Having surveyed the ways in which the expression "biblical theology" is used and sketched in a little of the ways it might most profitably be used, I shall try to outline some of the challenges that such a biblical theology will face. These may be conveniently divided into two kinds:

A. Formal Challenges

(1) *Many express grave skepticism about the viability of the discipline.* This skepticism springs from many sources. Nowadays not a little of it is hermeneutical. For those who, like Mark Brett,⁶⁰ adopt Gadamer's hermeneutics, Thiemann's view of revelation, and Lindbeck's hesitations over intratextual theology, it is not surprising that canonical approaches to interpretation are viewed with suspicion. In a recent essay, Pokorný dismisses the possibility of biblical theology,⁶¹ under any of my first four definitions, on three grounds: (a) revelation cannot be identified with the (writing of) history, that is, with the biblical text, so attempts to unify the biblical texts on the ground of the unity of the putative revelation they convey are futile; (b) theology, including that contained in the biblical texts, is "a reflexion, an explanation of the reported message,"⁶² and all such "reflexion" is necessarily person-variable, so the new hermeneutic is judged to render the goals of biblical theology unattainable; (c) the biblical documents are mutually contradictory and incompatible, so biblical theology is the merest chimera.

Obviously I cannot address these topics here. They represent one side of some of the deepest fissures in the body of opinions held by the guild of biblical exegetes and theologians. Even where two scholars concur that biblical theology, in the second or third senses, is possible, one scholar might begin with the theology of the Pentateuch and the other with the theology of the Hexateuch—or with the

60. Mark G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

61. Petr Pokorný, "The Problem of Biblical Theology," *HBT* 15 (1993) 83-94; Pokorný, "Probleme biblischer Theologies," *TL* 106 (1981) 1-8.

62. Pokorný, "The Problem of Biblical Theology," 87.

theology of J, working toward P and the Deuteronomistic history. One scholar might hold there are thirteen canonical letters penned by Paul, and the other that there are only ten, or nine, or seven, or perhaps only four. The entire *historical* reconstruction shifts, which means that the movements and connections we perceive in theological development change. And because the corpus is different, the theology found in the variously delineated corpora is bound to be different. Even a relatively minor aside may hide a very different application of the tools of historical criticism. Thus in the article to which reference has already been made, Beckwith states in a matter-of-fact way that the closest extant parallels to the covenant found in Deuteronomy "are provided by Hittite treaties between overlords and vassal kings dating from the latter part of the second millennium BC."⁶³ I may agree with him; but many do not.

I have no solutions to these dilemmas. I doubt that there are any; we are not going to achieve sweeping agreement on these issues any time soon. But if that is the case, then surely the following stances must prevail among those who share, more or less, the approach to biblical theology advocated here. *First*, we must not wait until there is widespread consensus on the nature of biblical theology before we engage in the discipline. We will end up waiting at least until the parousia. *Second*, we must not respond by adopting a lowest-common-denominator approach to biblical theology, happy to operate only with definitions five or six. One may, of course, happily adopt such a definition in a particular essay or book. But that must not be our lifelong scholarly stance, even if the reasons for such a stance are purely pragmatic. *Third*, we must simultaneously engage with those who insist biblical theology (of the second or third definition) is impossible, *and* get on with the task of writing and teaching such biblical theology. Of course, I do not mean that any one of us must tackle both jobs at the same time. Collectively, however, we must do both. Occasionally an individual scholar will achieve something at both levels simultaneously. For instance, in a recent and well-received doctoral dissertation, David Ball studies the "I am" passages in the Fourth Gospel, but stands current methods on their heads.⁶⁴ Instead of surveying all the possible backgrounds, and deciding into which background the "I am" expressions in John best fit, Ball examines these expressions *in John*, and on this basis casts around for appropriate backgrounds. He finds that none fits exactly. On the face of it he has simultaneously

63. Roger T. Beckwith, "Unity and Diversity," 94-95.

64. David M. Ball, "I am in Context: The Literary Function, Background, and Theological Implications of ἐγώ εἰμι in John's Gospel" (Ph.D. diss., Sheffield University, 1992).

contributed to Johannine theology (and thus to biblical theology), and set forth a methodological rigor that must be emulated.

In short, this first formal challenge to biblical theology is a perennial one that must not be permitted to intimidate us. Responding to this challenge will help to ensure that our work is honest, and that we engage with those who disagree with us; getting on with preparing and teaching such biblical theology regardless of this skepticism means we shall be acting in a way that is faithful to our own vision of where the truth lies, instead of letting others invariably set our agenda.

(2) *The second formal challenge to the discipline is the daunting need for exegetes and theologians who will deploy the full range of weapons in the exegetical arsenal, without succumbing to methodological narrowness or faddishness.* It is very doubtful, for instance, that responsible biblical theology can be constructed by those who are passionately interested in grammatical exegesis but who are totally insensitive to literary genre; by those who are fascinated by word studies but who are unaware of the advantages and limitations of "mirror reading"; and so on. What any responsible biblical theology requires, under the second or third definitions, is the careful pursuit of the meaning of the text. Hermeneutically sophisticated biblical theologians will happily concede that exhaustive knowledge of the meaning of a text is impossible, but they will nevertheless insist that true knowledge of the meaning of a text is not impossible. Inevitably they will be somewhat suspicious of methods that promise to reveal a great deal of what lies between the lines of the text (e.g., sociological interpretation), and more respectful of methods that actually shed light on the text itself (e.g., a competent grasp of relevant social history). Discourse analysis and narrative criticism will play their parts, but they will be wary of exegetes who deploy some relatively new method and claim stupendous new insights from the tool: experience shows that most of the "new insights" had already been gleaned by exegetes who worked in more traditional ways and who never mastered the jargon of the new "criticisms," while the focus on just one faddish tool almost always leads to semantic distortion of the text.

(3) *One of the most pressing formal challenges is the need to prepare biblical theologians who are eager and able to work with the entire Bible.*

At the very least, they must read and re-read the entire Bible. There is likely to be something distorted about a string of learned essays and monographs on, say, Paul, if those essays have been written by someone who has not bothered to study intensely Paul's Bible. There is, from the Christian perspective, something anaemic about a theology of the Psalms that has not grappled profoundly with the way Jesus and the New Testament writers read the Psalms.

The question will inevitably be raised: Granted the degree of specialization and the narrowness of focus in contemporary biblical studies, who is qualified to write biblical theology?⁶⁵ Some envisage intensive cooperation between New Testament and Old Testament specialists.⁶⁶ Others judge there is more hope of a single specialist branching out from home turf into the larger field. Thus Seebass writes as an Old Testament specialist who is nevertheless committed to integrating his specialty into a larger biblical perspective.⁶⁷ Even those of us who do not feel able enough or sufficiently experienced to attempt the grand synthesis should commit ourselves, in the smaller contributions to biblical theology that we may undertake, to maintain an awareness of the larger horizon.⁶⁸ There are of course many excellent examples.⁶⁹

No aspect of this challenge is more important, and more difficult, than the questions surrounding the use of the Old Testament by the New. But because this may be considered a material challenge as well as a formal challenge, I shall reserve comment for the final section of this paper.

(4) *Almost all who comment on the challenges of biblical theology bring up the problem of choosing an organizing principle.* I need not survey yet again the many choices that have been made. At the risk of reductionism, however, most of them in the last few decades fall into one of two camps. Either they offer inductive study of individual corpora, and bind those studies together as discreet chapters with very little integration; or they pursue some theme or themes across the biblical corpora, but offer very little "feel" for the contribution each corpus makes to the whole.

Doubtless there is a place for both kinds of study. But it is easy to imagine improvements, even if the execution might prove difficult. In the first kind, those that study the individual biblical corpora inductively, there would be improvement if the biblical theologian also devoted some thought and space to articulating how the diverse

65. Cf. Scobie, "Three Twentieth Century Biblical Theologies," *HBT* 14 (1992) 63.

66. E.g. G Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) 96.

67. H. Seebass, *Der Gott der ganzen Bibel: Biblische Theologie zur Orientierung im Glauben* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982).

68. Cf. W Harrington, *Path of Biblical Theology*, 373: "A biblical-theology-orientated exegesis is the only way, in the field of Old Testament and New Testament studies, that a first step can be taken, and a first thrust ventured. Thus, we will not only ask for a 'theology of the Old Testament' or a 'Pauline theology,' but also, in these limited areas, keep the wider context constantly in sight."

69. To cite but one: David Peterson, "Biblical Theology and the Argument of Hebrews," *In the Fullness of Time Festschrift for Donald Robinson*; ed. David Peterson and John Pryor; Homebush West: (Anzea, 1992) 219-35.

corpora are related to one another. In the second kind, those in which the control is a theme or a selection of themes traced out through the biblical documents, there would be improvement if several demonstrably central, interlocking themes were chosen, and if those interlocking themes were placed, for each corpus, in the context of the corpus contribution to the canon. In other words, both kinds of biblical theology might be enriched by an appropriate use of the strengths of the other kind. This would not be easy to write, but I think the results would be richer and more convincing than is often the case at present.⁷⁰

(5) *While considerable thought has been devoted in recent years to the move from exegesis to biblical theology, relatively little has been devoted to the move from biblical theology to systematic theology and to pastoral theology.* One finds the odd essay here and there,⁷¹ but far less than one might hope for. By and large, this remains a virgin field.⁷² I shall leave it in this fair state, and press on to the second kind of contemporary challenge to biblical theology.

B. Material Challenges

By material challenges to biblical theology I am referring to challenges of content rather than of method. These may be usefully divided into four groups:

(1) *Perennial concerns*: There is constant need for fresh inductive work on the biblical corpora, and for fresh work on certain topics of great importance that exercise the minds of theologians in most generations: christology, Holy Spirit, covenant, ecclesiology, and many more. If the work must constantly be redone, it is not necessarily because we are expressing dissatisfaction with what has already been done but because every generation must produce theologians who work from the primary sources, not merely people who repeat the received interpretations. Enough has already been said to indicate that in my view these two types of perennial concern—fresh inductive work on the biblical corpora and fresh work on central topics of

70. On this question, see the suggestive essay by Scobie, "The Structure of Biblical Theology."

71. E.g., Graeme Goldsworthy, "The Pastoral Application of Biblical Theology," *In the Fullness of Time*, 301-17.

72. There is perhaps one quasi-exception: see Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Systematische Theologie im Kontext biblischer Geschichte und Eschatologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983). But so much of the book is built around the thesis that the structure of systematic theology is determined by the reality of the biblical proclamation of the coming kingdom of God (understood as a kingdom of freedom) that the experiment promised in the title, though it is rich in insights, finally fails, falling too close to mere reductionism.

perennial importance—should ideally be brought together as closely as possible.

(2) *Prophetic concerns*: Here I have in mind topics that are central to biblical thought and therefore that *ought* to be central to our thought—even though in our culture they are viewed rather more as interesting than as utterly crucial.

I shall mention only two. The *first* is what the Bible says about God. Clearly that topic is becoming more important, as our culture uses the word "God" in extraordinarily diverse and mutually contradictory ways. The prevailing amorphous pluralism frowns on precise thought on this topic. Yet the gospel itself is more or less incoherent if the "God" who is presented in it is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of creation, the God of providence, the God of judgment, the God of redemption, the God who is as personal as he is transcendent. Doubtless one may legitimately teach and preach what God is like by using the traditional categories of systematic theology. I cannot help but wonder, however, if we would not be wise to deploy biblical theology. One might begin, for example, by retelling the Bible's story from the standpoint of God, insofar as that standpoint is disclosed in Scripture.

The *second* is what the Bible says about justification. This topic is of course hotly disputed among Pauline experts. The impact of E. P. Sanders, whose work now controls discussion in the field (whether one in large measure agrees with him or feels it necessary to challenge him), continues unabated, even if that impact is now more diffuse, since reactions to it have become many and sophisticated. It would be inappropriate to review the debate here. Nevertheless I suspect the debate would take on a different hue if, in addition to studying the nature of second temple Judaism, notions of purity and holiness, the $\delta\iota\kappa$ - word-group and related expressions, numerous Pauline passages whose meaning has been called into question, the history of the debate especially since the time of the majesterial reformation, and a host of allied topics, we were to ask ourselves a biblical theology question: How does the God of the Bible put human beings right with him across the length and breadth of the Bible's story line? It is a question rarely asked; when it is, it is usually treated superficially. An excellent start on this sort of approach has been made by Clowney.⁷³

But my point is larger than this topic, however crucial the topic itself is. I am arguing that, with respect to a number of prophetic

73. Cf. Edmund P. Clowney, "The Biblical Doctrine of Justification by Faith," *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 17-50.

concerns, much more biblical theology needs to be undertaken than has yet been done.

(3) *Popular concerns*: Here I am thinking of a number of "hot" topics, that is topics on the current agenda. Somewhere along the line Christians start asking "What does the Bible say about X?"—and "X" may be abortion, prayer, ecology, economics, marriage and divorce, feminism, worship, litigation, home schooling, and a dozen other topics. How shall I, as a *Neutestamentler* committed to biblical theology, respond to such questions? How will biblical theology help me to think my way through these thickets?

Not for a moment am I suggesting that biblical theology will enable us to resolve all our disagreements on these and other subjects. But it will help us to think clearly in at least three ways. *First*, negatively, it will tame the subject, that is, it will help us see the topic in its proper proportion. One of the troubling features about contemporary Christianity is the large number of single-issue types who assume the gospel but rarely articulate it or think about it, while investing extraordinary passion and energy in *relatively* peripheral subjects—peripheral, that is, from the perspective of Scripture, if not from the current mood. We shall not all agree just how central or peripheral each of the topics is that I have just listed. Fair enough. But if we are committed to biblical theology, we will at least ask ourselves just where our topic fits into the scheme of things.

Second, the discipline of biblical theology will enable us to answer questions about popular concerns with more than proof-texting. It is both amusing and painful to read most contemporary books on, say, worship. Those written by musicians tend to make much of David and his choirs. Charismatics dwell on 1 Corinthians 14. Those in sacramental traditions begin with the eucharist. New Testament specialists tend to extrapolate on what are probably early Christian hymns embedded in the New Testament text. Another heritage elevates the ministry of the Word. What almost none of the books in the area has done is trace out the language and themes of worship across the Bible's story line, dwelling at length on the nature of worship under the old covenant and under the new, and the ties, and differences, between the two, and why they are that way. Only then, surely, is it possible to fit the various passages that speak to the question into a coherent framework from which many useful and practical conclusions may be drawn. A remarkable exception to this lack is the recent book by David Peterson.⁷⁴

74. David G. Peterson, *Engaging with God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992). Cf. also some of the essays in *Worship: Adoration and Action* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

Third, for some of these "hot" topics, especially those where the Bible does not directly address them at length, biblical theology may help us establish a nonnegotiable framework before we integrate other useful material and venture value judgments. It seems to me that that is the path of wisdom in addressing, say, questions about home schooling and litigation. Doubtless one may begin by referring to Deuteronomy 6 for the former and 1 Corinthians 5 for the latter,⁷⁵ but the issues are surely more complex than those addressed by these passages alone, as important as they are. I am not suggesting that relatively straightforward passages should be "explained away" by vague appeal to larger biblical themes. Rather, I am arguing that in both of these instances (home-schooling and litigation) there is a host of related biblical themes that must be explored along the axis of the Bible's story line—for example, the relation of the believer to the unbelieving world, the place of the child and of the family in God's world, the constraints imposed by love and by witness, and so forth. In a culture where even Christians suffer from rapidly increasing biblical illiteracy, it is becoming more and more important to reestablish the basic contours of biblical thought before the details are taken up.⁷⁶ The alternative is the kind of appalling proof texting that succeeds only in domesticating the text to the current agenda.

(4) *Pivotal concerns*: By far the most important of these are tied to the way the New Testament uses the Old. At long last the subtitle of this paper comes into play: quite decidedly I am offering the perspective of a student of the New Testament.

The subject is pivotal to biblical theology, of course, because it directly addresses the diversity in the Christian canon at its most acute point. In the last few decades an enormous amount of work has been done on the subject.⁷⁷ One thinks not least of the many technical articles written by our colleagues Earle Ellis and Craig Evans, or of the crucial distinction between appropriation techniques and hermeneutical axioms deployed by Douglas Moo.⁷⁸ Many

75. See, e.g., Robert D. Taylor, "Toward a Theology of Litigation: A Law Professor Looks at 1 Corinthians 6:1-11," *Ex Auditu* 2 (1987) 105-16.

76. It is perhaps worth acknowledging that many of our "hot" topics were instructively handled by an earlier generation in which the topic was not "hot" but in which the biblical literacy was a good deal higher. One thinks, for instance, of the little book by C. F. D. Moule, *Man and Nature in the New Testament: Some Reflections on Biblical Ecology* (London: Athlone, 1964)—written long before the modern "greens" became an influential movement.

77. For a useful survey and evaluation, cf. *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture Festschrift for Barnabas Lindars*; ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

78. Douglas J. Moo, *The Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narratives* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983).

continue to pursue the connections between law and gospel, or between promise and fulfillment; others fruitfully explore the nature of typology. One of the most creative proposals in recent years is that of Chris Wright,⁷⁹ but the structure of thought he advocates is so heavily tied to Old Testament covenantal structure that he is sometimes less convincing when he treats the new covenant.

In short, the topic is extremely complex, and the discussion rather confusing. I would like to make three suggestions for those who think that biblical theology, of the second and third definitions, is possible. *First*, single approach proposals on how to understand the use of the Old Testament in the New, are simply not going to work, no matter how sophisticated. For example, Beauchamp proposes that the fulfillment of the Scriptures in Christ could be the basis of a genuinely biblical theology. So far, few Christians would want to disagree; the question is what he means. His method consists of finding the human authenticity of fulfillment in the anthropological dimensions of Speech and Body, reflecting life through tales exchanged. The critical symbolism of the exchange is marriage symbolism on various levels of experience: personal, social, and historical.⁸⁰ However suggestive, there are too many things left out (e.g., hiddenness, sufficient historical referent, the nature of fulfillment determined more closely by texts) and too many things imported from alien disciplines.

Second, granted that we must fully acknowledge the enormous wealth of ways in which the New Testament cites or alludes to the Old, there is one particular pairing of themes which in my view has considerable promise for enriching biblical theology—a pairing by and large left untouched in the modern literature. How is it that the very same gospel can be said, by various New Testament writers, to be, on the one hand, prophesied in the past and fulfilled in the present, and, on the other, hidden in the past and revealed in the present? There has been too little reflection on the canonical and biblical-theological implications of *μυστήριον* and related words and concepts. I would love to explore this with you in a preliminary way, but I press on.

Third (and now the subtitle takes on full force), I would argue that all Christian theologians, including those whose area of specialty is the Old Testament or some part of it, are under obligation to read the

79. Of the various things he has penned, see perhaps especially, as a foundation to his thought, C. J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

80. Paul Beauchamp, *L'Un et l'Autre Testament* (2 vols.; Paris: Seuil, 1977, 1990); Beauchamp, *Le Récit, la Lettre et le Corps* (Paris: Seuil, 1982). His complex ideas are nicely summarized in his article, "Accomplir les Ecritures; Un chemin de théologie biblique," 1 *RB* 99 (1992) 132-62.

Old Testament, in certain respects, with Christian eyes. I specifically disavow the flattening of historical distinctions and succumbing to endless anachronism; I insist that uncontrolled typology is mischievous; I acknowledge that certain kinds of historical study of the Old Testament documents must specifically disavow later knowledge in order to ensure accurate historical and theological analysis of the people and of the documents they have left behind. At the same time, no Christian *Alttestamentler* has the right to leave the challenge of *biblical* study to the New Testament departments. The Gospel records insist that Jesus himself, and certainly his earliest followers after him, read the Old Testament in christological ways. Jesus berated his followers for not discerning these points themselves. The rationale for such exegesis is multifaceted and complex. But if we are *Christian* theologians, that rationale must be teased out from both ends of the canon.

Conclusion

Perhaps, in conclusion, I may be permitted to express two hopes. (1) If more of us engaged in biblical theology, we might together change what we commonly find in commentaries. Many otherwise excellent contemporary commentaries are theologically arid. Having become fearful of a genre of commentary that imports the entire sweep of systematic theology into every text, we have moved to a genre of commentary that offers countless suggestions about the theology of communities real and imagined, while largely avoiding genuinely biblical theology. This needs to be changed, both on account of the nature of the Bible, and for the sake of the good of the church. (2) Many of us teach in environments where the majority of our students are going to be teachers and preachers in the church of God. That means there is at least some onus on us not only to convey content, but to indicate how to present the content tellingly and effectively. We must not only bake our apple pie, we must garnish it to make it so appetizing that only the most deadened palates will refuse to taste it.