Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology

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We must realize that there is one theme running throughout all of the books of the Bible, tying the subplots, characters, and sub-themes into one grand redemptive drama.

Hermeneutics, or the theory of textual interpretation, is one of the hot topics in New Testament studies today. Many are puzzled over the whole matter, for it is finally recognized that one's hermeneutical approach has a significant effect upon the results of one's interpretive conclusions. A generation ago, Cornelius van Til explained this repeatedly: there are no "brute facts," he said. Facts are mute and are always interpreted in conformity with one's presuppositions, whether those presuppositions are explicitly understood, or not. The inaugural task of a Christian theologian is to conform one's presuppositions, including one's hermeneutics, to the Bible.

As an illustration of how presuppositions affect the facts, consider the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Paul, it meant the inauguration of a whole new era of cosmic renewal, a new creation. But to an Epicurean the resurrection was nonsense. They had adopted the theory that all things were composed of atoms in constant, mindless movement, so that even if the resurrection of Christ did take place, it meant no more than that some groups of atoms had swerved out of their normal path like so many quarks. This undoubtedly explains why some Epicureans objected so strongly to the resurrection (Acts 17:16-34).

Today, hermeneutical reflection and practice often reflects not the biblical viewpoint, but the agenda of our pluralistic, special interest culture. In the scholarly literature on hermeneutics we find, for instance, structuralist hermeneutics and post-structuralist hermeneutics, feminist hermeneutics, as well as black womanist hermeneutics, third world hermeneutics, and Marxist-liberation hermeneutics (still), and a host of others.

While we appreciate that one must take the "two horizons" of the biblical culture and our culture into account in the interpretive enterprise, one wonders just how subjective special interest hermeneutics have become. Our suspicions are confirmed in one of the newer outlooks, the so-called "reader response" hermeneutic which states, in effect, that the legitimate meaning of any text is up to the reader. Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty could very well speak for this position: "'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.'" [*Through the Looking-Glass*]. Humpty Dumpty could very well now say, "When I read a text."
Our evangelical friends are puzzling over hermeneutical theories as well, seen especially in the watchwords, "unity and diversity," and "unity in diversity," and so on. To some people this means searching for the essential "core" of inspired biblical teaching which is surrounded by a potentially tension-filled periphery. Others, though, legitimately see that Matthew differs from Luke or John in theological perspective and concerns without implying contradiction; rather, it provides pleonasm "fullness" of viewpoint.

The brilliant old Princeton theologian, Geerhardus Vos, anticipated many aspects of today's hermeneutical discussions, notably, issues regarding unity and diversity. The perspective he developed, carried forward by Herman Ridderbos, Richard Gaffin, Edmund Clowney, and others, is called "biblical theology," or the "Redemptive Historical" approach.

A full description of biblical theology and its hermeneutic is not always easy. Because it has suffered from caricature, it is easy to jump to hasty conclusions about it. For example, biblical theology has been equated with Christianizing allegory, such as that practiced early on by Clement, Origen, and other Alexandrian church fathers. They found a symbolic meaning to nearly everything. The "great whales" created in Genesis 1:21, Origen said, represent "impious thoughts and abominable understandings" that we too should "bring forth" before God that he may assign them their place after their own kind!

The reason that biblical theology suffers mistaken identity with allegory is probably its persistent habit of reading the Bible as a book about Jesus Christ from beginning to end. Thus, a biblical theologian reading about Adam in the Garden of Eden tends to think of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. This does not imply that Adam was a parabolic versus an historical figure. Quite the contrary, biblical theology is staunchly opposed to taking historical figures mythically, since biblical theology is predicated on the fact that redemption was accomplished in genuine history. Someone (I don't remember who) once put it well: "Fact without word is dumb; the word without fact is empty."

But is biblical theology warranted in reading Christ into Adam, and vice versa? Apparently Paul thought so when he equates Christ with the Last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45) and Adam as a "type" of Christ (Rom. 5:14). Adam stood as covenant head of the first creation, whereas Christ is head of a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:15). Therefore, if anything else, biblical theology is a hermeneutic of the Emmaus road: "And starting with Moses and all the prophets he [Christ] interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the scriptures" (Lk. 24:27; emphasis added). Biblical theology is Christocentric: "Moses wrote about me" (Jn. 5:46).

So far, however, we could simply identify biblical theology with older ideas about typology and be done with it. Well, biblical theology does have typological elements. As mentioned, Adam and Christ have a type-antitype relationship as Paul makes explicit in Romans 5:14. Elsewhere he interprets the rock at Meribah as a type of Christ. It was, he says, a "spiritual rock" that followed Israel in the wilderness, "for the rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4). But typology can typically present the Old Testament symbols as pictures that are meaningful in our era alone, whereas in the Old Testament era they may have had a different value. Biblical theology would insist that the Old Testament types spoke as witnesses to the coming realities of Christ in their own day, as well as in ours. Through the types and shadows "the elders received testimony" to what lay in their future (Heb. 11:2). The faith of the actors in biblical revelation constituted, as we can paraphrase, "the inner core of things hoped for, as evidence of things not yet seen" (Heb. 11:1).

So what exactly is biblical theology? Geerhardus Vos provides the best definition: "Biblical theology is nothing else than the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity."1 Vos offers a helpful analogy to explain "organic progress." The revelation of Christ in the Bible begins like an acorn that sends out its shoot and progresses toward the "fullness of time" when it grows into a full and stately oak. As a growing shoot, the tree if still and ever an oak; similarly, God's revelation is always genuine, true, and unified in all its multiform expressions during its historic progression.

Revelation never loses its focus on Christ, although as an historically progressive revelation, not all elements of the revelation were completed or completely understood in its earlier phases. Peter then expresses this fact when he says that the revelation given through the prophets by "the Spirit of Christ" who testified "in them" was not fully understood by the prophets themselves, even though "they made careful search and enquiry into these

matters regarding the sufferings and consequent glories of Christ" (1 Pt. 1:10-12). Nevertheless, they did understand that there was a future reality awaiting fulfillment.

This is all fine and well, but are we truly justified in adopting this outlook for our principal hermeneutical orientation? This is an excellent question, and one that deserves fuller discussion some other time. Let it suffice to say that most practitioners of biblical theology employ a wide range of traditional tools in the process of biblical interpretation: analysis of the historical-cultural setting, studies in the original languages, discourse analysis, attention to genre, etc. These are all carefully employed.

But one of the key convictions of Vos and all who follow is that we must conform our hermeneutics to that of the Bible. And if Jesus displayed a Christocentric, biblical theological hermeneutic on the road to Emmaus and elsewhere, then it is normative for us as well. Any other hermeneutic is lacking an essential ingredient. In what follows, we will explore parts of Galatians three, one place where this biblical theological hermeneutic is manifest.
So, to begin, Paul introduces in Galatians 3:17 the proposition that he will develop: "You know, then, that those who are of faith are the sons of Abraham." After this introduction, he begins his argument in verse 8 with a provocative assertion: "Now since scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles from faith, it preached the gospel ahead of time to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations will be blessed in you.'"

In passing, we should not neglect to point out that Paul accepted the divine authority of Scripture, since he says that it was the scripture that "foresaw" and "preached the gospel ahead of time." What the Scripture says is what God says; what God foreknows, the scripture foreknows. Likewise, Scripture locks up all under sin, which is properly God's action (Gal. 3:22). This interchangeability of "God" and "Scripture" indicates the highest view of inspiration and authority of Scripture at the start.

Secondly, in Galatians 3:8, Paul shows that God's program too bring the Gentiles into his covenantal blessings was anything but a contingency plan developed ad hoc when Christ was rejected by his contemporaries. Rather, God's plan to justify the Gentiles by faith was the very basis of his proleptically preaching the gospel to Abraham in the form of a promise. In this pre-preached gospel, Abraham looked ahead to the day of Christ and rejoiced (Jn. 8:56), and he perceived in this way that the land of his inheritance was not Palestine, but "the city whose architect and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10).

Nevertheless, the blessing we inherit is not inherently different from the blessing given to Abraham, for we receive it along with him (Gal. 3:9). Although the Old Testament saints had not fully inherited that which was promised yet, they did have a genuine encounter with Christ in the unfolding revelation of their day. But it always had a future orientation, so that they might not "be perfected apart from us" (Heb. 11:39-40; 12:22-23).

What unifies all biblical promises is Christ, for there is one promise in the variegated covenants (Eph. 2:12), because there is one Son of Abraham to whom all the promises were made. Paul makes this latter point in Galatians 3:16: "The promises were made to Abraham and to his seed. It does not say, 'And to his seeds,' as though to many, but to one, 'and to your seed,' who is Christ."

It may appear on first reading of Galatians 3:16 that Abraham had a co-equal share in the promise with Christ, his Seed. But even Abraham recedes into the background when we read that the promise was still unfulfilled "until that Seed should come to whom it had been promised" (Gal. 3:19). Even Abraham received that which was promised only through the

coming of the Seed, who is Promisor, Promisee, and Promised One! "As many as are God's promises, they are 'Yes' in him" (2 Cor. 1:20).

Thus we see that there is unity to the Old Testament revelation; it pointed to Christ, and the saints back then, like Abraham, saw Christ dimly and from afar, but truly. Revelation had progress, but in it, the Old Testament saint experienced a genuine encounter with Christ, albeit, a proleptic encounter.

Nevertheless, Paul boldly proceeds to show that the revelation in Abraham's day‹despite it being based on faith‹was still incomplete revelation. He expresses this by showing the fact that the promise to Abraham was awaiting the Seed to whom it was primarily directed (Gal. 3:19). And this promise is now granted after the first Advent by way of a specific "faith in Jesus Christ to those who believe" (Gal. 3:22).

This explains how Paul can say, in verse 23, "Before the faith came, we were imprisoned under the law." And in case we miss the obvious point that this specific faith was impending under Moses, he continues in verse 24, "And we were locked up until that coming faith should be revealed. But now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a nanny [paedagogos]."

Now, Paul does not at all intend to say that no one prior to Christ had faith, nor that they were justified by law-keeping back then, instead of by faith. He is showing that the organically developing revelation of God was not completed until Christ should come‹indeed, it still awaits consummation at his Second Coming, the one climatic event still outstanding. The difference between the pre-Advent and post-Advent faith is so dramatic in its intensity, clarity, and fullness that Paul expresses it as if it were future in prior eras. Remember, the gospel preached to Abraham was an anticipation of the apostolic preaching. God spoke to Abraham with us in mind (Rom. 4:22-24), who have tasted of the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6:5). Our faith is qualitatively new because we live in "these last days" (Heb. 1:2; cf. 1 Cor. 10:11; Jm. 5:3; 1 Pt. 1:20; 1 Jn. 2:18; Jude 18), upon which the prophets of old and even angels had longed to gaze (1 Pt. 1:12).

Paul wraps up his discussion in Galatians three by returning to the main issue: we are sons of Abraham by faith. He concludes, "So, if you are Christ's [disciple], then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29). Wait a minute! I thought there was only one seed "Who is Christ," remember? Ah yes, Paul says, but in that one seed through whom all God's promises intersect, the people who are united to Christ by faith also become sons and seed and heirs! This is union with Christ in all its glory: "So it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. And this fleshly existence of mine now is lived by faith in the son of God" (Gal. 2:20); cf. Col. 3:3-4).

To conclude, then, we have described the hermeneutics of biblical theology as a Christocentric approach to the bible that we found was commended to us by Christ on the Emmaus road, and by Paul in Galatians three. And although we have not used the term until now, biblical theology is a recognition that eschatology (or the biblical teaching on the last things) is central throughout the entire course of redemptive history. As Vos put it, "Eschatology is prior to soteriology." This is nothing but another way of expressing the proleptic character of the promise to Abraham, as in Galatians 3:18. The coming promise was experienced ahead of time by Abraham; it was an eschatological blessing cast backward into redemptive history.

But we, who live this side of Christ's resurrection, live in the "fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4). Although this age will not be consummated until the Second Coming, we live in a "semi-

eschatological" era (to use Vos's term). Thus we have received a "down payment" and a "first fruits" of the promised inheritance, the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:14; 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5; Rom. 8:23). It is this perspective, we believe, that makes the most sense of the whole of Scripture, for in Christ "all things hold together," both in the old creation and in the new creation (Col. 1:15-20).

Notes

1. G. Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology As a Science and As a Theological Disciple," Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation (R. Gaffin, ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 15.

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