

# Building Biblical Theology

LESSON  
ONE

What is Biblical  
Theology?  
Faculty Forum



THIRD MILLENNIUM  

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# Building Biblical Theology

## Lesson One: What is Biblical Theology?

### Faculty Forum

With  
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Students  
Rob Griffith  
Jean Mondé

### Question 1:

### What is the difference between systematic theology and biblical theology?

**Student:** Richard, could you distinguish between systematic theology and biblical theology, and why is biblical theological theology so important?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, it's good to start there because despite the fact that we try to make that really clear in the video, it's not altogether clear to people many times. What is the difference between biblical theology and systematic theology? Well, we have another series called building systematic theology, and we try very hard in there to distinguish traditional systematic theology from what people would call systematics today. And the distinction basically is this, that there's been a long history of the church putting the theology of the Bible into a system, into an organized presentation. And through history, that organization has been shaped largely by the cultures that the church was in a various times — early on in the Neo-Platonic world of the Mediterranean Sea area and then later on in the world of Aristotelianism, and then later on in the modern world of Enlightenment rationalism. And so it took a particular shape, and there was a structure and an order that has become very traditional so that people follow that order whenever they do traditional systematic theology.

Now, more recently, however, this thing called biblical theology that we're talking on in this series has also taken shape. It's become something that is more or less the same when people do it. That's the key here. Now, because there hasn't been such a long history of biblical theology, there is more diversity in the use of that term, but it's taken basic shape, and the basic shape is this: in systematic theology, you can think of it as a triangle or a pyramid of concepts moving from the biggest ones down to the smaller ones. And of course, the big one is God, and then that's followed by other teachings of the Bible that are a little less categorical or a little less comprehensive. You can move down a little further, a little further, a little further, and so the idea is to get sort of a timeless organization of what the Bible teaches as a whole. That's what systematics does. Biblical theology, as it's evolved over the last several centuries especially, has been influenced by historicism which is looking at everything in terms of its, well, to use the modern term, its evolution, its growth. And so when you apply that to the Bible, biblical theology is the attempt to understand the

teachings of the Bible as they developed over time. In other words, the Bible wasn't written in one moment or even one century. It was written over centuries, and its theology developed and grew over time. So rather than looking at the Bible and asking, what are the permanent truths that we can derive from it and stick into our pyramid of systematic theology, biblical theologians tend to ask, how have the various themes of the Bible grown and through various periods of time? And that really is the difference.

Now, its importance is something a little bit different. You could argue, as many do, that it's important because biblical theology is closer to the Bible itself. Now, I don't believe that, okay? And we'll talk about that a little bit more as we go. But many people actually do think biblical theology is closer to the Bible itself than systematic theology. But another reason why it's important is because everybody's doing it now. See, that's the key. I mean, if you go to this denomination, they're doing what they call biblical theology. You go to that denomination; they're doing what they call biblical theology. If you go to a university and you go to a religion class and it's a Bible class, they're doing what they call biblical theology. And the result is that, as various teachers and writers have been talking to each other, there's this sort of growing consensus of what would look to a traditional theologian as a new way of looking at the Bible — biblical theology. And it's cutting across denominational lines. Because systematic theology is different as you go from one denomination to another, from one group to another—it's very different—they have different conclusions they draw. But biblical theologians tend to use the same categories, they tend to come to very similar conclusions, they tend to have the same kinds of priorities, and so it's creating a new form of unity in theology among Christians of many different stripes and brands, and that is probably the reason why it's most important these days.

## Question 2:

### Which is more important: systematic theology or biblical theology?

**Student:** So which is more important, biblical or systematic theology?

**Dr. Pratt:** Hmm. If I was answering the way everybody else answers, I'd say biblical theology, obviously, not systematic theology. And do you know why they say that? It's because when you think systematic theology, they think of things like it's scholastic — meaning it's from Aristotle — or they think it's old, or it's rationalistic. And so it's taking the Bible, they would say, systematics is, and jamming it into categories that are foreign to it. They're Hellenistic categories and things like that. But then they also would say that biblical theology is true to the Bible. Now if you believe that's true, if you believe that systematics is somehow one step removed from the Bible itself and that biblical theology is in between, then obviously biblical theology is more important, because the goal is to make your theology biblical in that sense. Okay? So if it really is closer to the Bible of necessity, well then you'd want to

say it's more important. But I personally don't believe that. In fact, I've been sort of a lone voice in this fighting hard to say no, no, this is not true. Biblical theology and systematic theology are, as it were, both connected to the Bible if they're good. And sometimes they're good and sometimes they're bad. I mean, they can both represent the Bible and they can both misrepresent the Bible. And then I see these two as interacting as equals. Rather than thinking that one is more important than the other, I see them as equals, and the question of importance then is related to what are you trying to do in your particular project? What's your goal? And sometimes, biblical theology will be more important to a particular goal that you have in mind, and sometimes, systematic theology will be more important for another goal that you may have. And I just think it's important to come to the point that we no longer, as has often been done, give people the impression they have to choose between these two and give priority to one over the other. I don't think it's necessary, and in fact, I think it's very harmful to do that.

### Question 3:

#### **Do systematic theology and biblical theology inform each other?**

**Student:** So Richard, does systematic theology inform biblical theology? Or does biblical theology inform systematic theology?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, my answer is yes, as you would probably anticipate. The idea is that BT — biblical theology — and ST— systematic theology — form what we often call webs of multiple reciprocities because they constantly feed back on each other constantly. Now, biblical theologians, if you talk to one, if they really specialize in this, they usually don't want to admit that they're influenced by systematics. They want to think that all they're doing is just getting what they're getting straight from the Bible and they're just telling you what the Bible says, but they're not. They're not coming as blank slates. They're coming with all kinds of predispositions and presuppositions about what the Bible says, and either formally or informally, they get that from historic Christian theology, which is basically systematic theology. I mean, they may get their basic orientations from a creed, they may get it from a confession, or they may just get it from things they learned as children in church. But they're going to be coming to biblical theology with information that shapes biblical theology. A great example is biblical theology, just like systematic theology, tends to think that the most important concept in the Bible is God. Now where do you get that idea? You certainly don't get that straight from the Bible. You get that from the history of Christian theology through the millennia, especially Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism that emphasize: to understand anything else, you've got to understand the top of the pyramid, which is God. And so as we learned in that series on systematics, that becomes the crucial thing.

Now, in biblical theology, what they say is the acts of God, God in history, that is the most critical thing to be known. Not what people do, not what donkeys do, not what

plants do, but what God does in history in the Bible. And just the priority given to God is itself a demonstration that systematics is influencing biblical theology. I mean, there's just no question that that's true. But it flips around the other way, too. Systematics has always been influenced by the Bible. It's not as if systematicians, Aquinas or any others that you might name in the long history of systematic theology, have been ignorant of the Bible. They know that the Bible has a development. They know that it talks about things, and those things are talked about again and again and again, and that the Bible's faith evolved over time. They knew that. And so when they talked about the Bible in systematic theology, they were in effect doing biblical theology. And so they were allowing that to influence, even at its height, systematics. Okay? Even at its most rational and abstract forms, it was still be influenced by the developments of theology in the Bible. So it's not that one informs the other and the other is simply receiving things. It's that both are always influencing each other, as are a million other things that we're not even mentioning here.

And again, to put that out there is a little bit different than the way most people talk about this subject. I have to keep saying this because in most Christian circles, evangelical Christian circles today, if somebody uses the phrase biblical theology, you're supposed to sit there and sort of take a deep breath and say, "Oh, we are doing something now that's very special and very different than what anyone's ever done before." Especially if you hear them tagging on the front or the back of everything they say "...the redemptive historical significance of..." If they say "the redemptive historical significance of," then they think that somehow they're doing biblical theology and they're doing it in a way that no one has ever done this before. And it's just simply not true. Everyone has known that the Bible is historical, that it talks about redemptive history. Even the most abstract of systematicians have known that, and they have used the Bible with that knowledge in their systematic theology. And so the give and take is extremely important for this main reason, because many times people who do biblical theology today maybe are not quite as self-conscious as they ought to be about traditional Christian beliefs, and so they end up going haywire off into this heresy or that heresy, thinking that they're just doing what the Bible does. But in reality, what they're doing is just poor evaluation of what the Bible does or says, because they're not as conscious of systematic theology — traditional systematics — as they should be. So it's important to keep that reciprocity in mind all the time. Jean, have you ever known anybody who claims to do biblical theology who has really sort of strayed off into crazy ideas or even heretical ideas?

**Student:** Absolutely.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's what every cult does, isn't it?

**Student:** That's right.

**Dr. Pratt:** Cults do not usually throw away their Bibles. They are really very careful, sometimes, biblical theologians without the restraint and without the guidance of thousands of years of theology that we call systematics. And that's the problem with

most so-called Christian cults, and I think that's the way it is for us today as well, even among sophisticated intellectual types. We've just got to be very careful to know that BT and ST work together all the time.

#### **Question 4:**

#### **Does biblical theology reflect the content and priorities of the Bible?**

**Student:** Now Richard, lots of people say that biblical theologians reflect both the content and priorities. Do they really do that?

**Dr. Pratt:** The content and the priorities of the Bible? Yeah. That's a great question because they'll say that, but the reality is that it's very hard to figure out what the priorities and the content of the Bible actually are. Okay? I mean, because they're different in different parts of the Bible. This is the problem. Now, often what happens is that talk, that kind of rhetoric, comes from the fact that biblical theologians are convinced that the Bible emphasizes God in history, God acting in history, that this is the centerpiece of the Bible. We'll talk about that more as we go through the lesson. But if you believe that that's true of the Bible, well then biblical theology does emphasize that priority in contrast with systematics which emphasizes God sort of abstract, God in himself, God as Trinity, God as one, those kinds of things. Okay? So that's way up there. So that contrast is often set between systematics and biblical theology, and that the priorities of the Bible are God acting in history, and so biblical theologians think they're emphasizing the priorities of the Bible. But here's the problem. What parts of the Bible talk the most about God acting in history? Rob, what parts of the Bible do that?

**Student:** The whole Bible.

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, that's what a biblical theologian would say, but I don't think that's really true is it? I mean, would you say that's true of Proverbs?

**Student:** Not necessarily.

**Dr. Pratt:** No, Proverbs is sort of abstract, talking about, you know, things of life, ordinary things of life. "There are six things, yea, seven that have four legs." I mean, there's no act of God in that. Right?

**Student:** Ecclesiastes.

**Dr. Pratt:** Ecclesiastes is another. This has always been the problem with biblical theology, and it is that they tend to operate with a canon within the canon. Wisdom literature like Job, like Proverbs, like Ecclesiastes, really don't talk that much about the great and mighty acts of God in history, and if you're a biblical theologian and you're trying to reflect the priorities of the Bible, and you've decided the priority is



God acting in history, well then what do you do with a book like Proverbs? Basically, you ignore it. And if you were to look at most biblical theologies, modern biblical theologies, you'll find they do very little with books like Job and Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. So wisdom literature really is not a high priority for them but see it is a priority for Job. Job is a priority of Job. Okay? Proverbs is a priority of Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes is a priority of Ecclesiastes. And the problem is that different parts of the Bible have different priorities. The priorities of Samuel and Kings are different than the priorities of the book of Chronicles, even though they're covering the same history. The priorities of the four Gospels are very different from each other, even though they are covering the same historical period of Christ's life on earth. And so it all depends on what you mean by priorities of Scripture. When you get that high up in the abstraction, you sometimes lose sight of the specific things that are priorities in different parts of the Bible. And that's where it becomes a problem to say that biblical theologians really are stressing both the content and the priorities of the Bible. Which priorities? I mean, there's a book in the Bible that doesn't even mention God. Which one?

**Students:** Esther.

**Dr. Pratt:** Esther, that's right. Okay, so how important then can the acts of God in history be to the book of Esther? Well, there's probably something else that's more of a priority to the writer of Esther than what biblical theologians normally think in terms of. So it becomes a critical issue then when you think you're always stressing what the Bible stresses. You remember that opening triangle in our lessons that we talk about how you can look at the Bible from different angles, one of them being literary analysis, the second one being thematic analysis, and the third one being historical analysis? Well, systematics is basically looking at the Bible thematically according to the themes that arise in the church and answering the questions that the church gets. Biblical theology looks at it historically emphasizing the evolution and growth of theology in the Bible historically. But that's not the only way to look at it. There's another way to look at it, which is what I've been basically doing for the last few moments, and that is this literary perspective, asking what is the priority of each book? What's the focus of each piece of the Bible in its literary presentation? And when you do that, it messes up anybody else who's saying, "I know exactly what the priority of the whole Bible is," because the Bible has different priorities as it addresses different situations.

### Question 5:

#### Why do biblical theologians focus on extraordinary acts of God?

**Student:** Richard, it seems that biblical theologians focus more on the extraordinary acts of God rather than the ordinary. Why is that?

**Dr. Pratt:** They do. They focus on what they often call “the mighty acts of God”, or the great and mighty acts of God sometimes. And that means things that are more extraordinary, miraculous, in fact: Things like the crossing of the Red Sea. That’s classic for a biblical theologian. Or the fall of Jerusalem. That would be another huge, miraculous kind of event. The reason they do that? The cynical answer is because those are the more exciting parts of the Bible. How’s that? And I guess in some ways you could say, and I think it’s fair to say, that those times when God intervenes dramatically into history in the Bible are more decisive, or they have more powerful ramifications for the direction of history and that sort of thing. Normally — I know it’s sort of funny to talk about extraordinary things being anything, so much obvious impact. I mean, there’s nothing probably that impacts the Bible more than the exodus from Egypt. Okay? That whole conglomeration of events including the crossing of the Red Sea, it’s so big that it’s never forgotten. And when you think about the New Testament then, you can think maybe of Jesus and what he did, and that is so big it can’t be forgotten. You can’t understand anything without a footnote to it, at least. And so you can sort of understand why they do that. But, when you stress the extraordinary acts of God in the Bible to the neglect of the ordinary, then they tend to sort of float in the air. They tend to become sort of objects in and of themselves, sort of floating without any connection to real life. And the Bible doesn’t do that. The Bible connects these big events to real people’s ordinary lives, and sometimes biblical theology is impoverished because it doesn’t stress also the ordinary, daily lives of people, because God was active in their lives, too. I mean, if you think about the Gospels for example, does it just talk about the big things that Jesus did, like his death and his resurrection? Of course not.

**Student:** He walked.

**Dr. Pratt:** That’s right. He walked around, he talked to people, he touched people, and people reacted this way and that way. Those are part of the gospel message, too. And so biblical theologians do make a mistake if they utterly ignore the more ordinary things of the Bible.

### Question 6:

#### How might biblical theology make use of an ordinary act of God?

**Student:** Well, can you give an example of how we might focus on an ordinary event?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah. Well, let’s take one, or maybe we’ll take two, one from the New Testament and one from the Old Testament. Take Jesus and the feeding of the five thousand, think of that for just a moment. You know, what a biblical theologian would tend to do is to talk about the five loaves and two fish that are multiplied to feed five thousand people. Okay? So a great and mighty act of God occurred. Then they’ll draw all kinds of theological conclusions from that that God can feed the

billions of people in the world spiritual food, and things like that, and that Jesus was the great Messiah, and things like that. But it's not very careful in the sense that one of the critical pieces of that story of the feeding of the five thousand is what might be called more ordinary, that when Jesus looked at them and saw that they had been following him around and listening to his teaching, and there are five thousand of them, and there are no McDonalds, there are no fast food places out there, they're hungry, they've been with him for days, and he notices the crowd and, as the text says, he had pity on them, he had compassion toward them. Now that's no great and mighty act of God that Jesus had compassion on hungry people who had been following him around. But it's critical to the significance of the entire event. Now see, that's very ordinary, and if you're not concerned about the ordinary and you just want the big things, then you're going to skip right over that as if that has nothing to do with it. And, unfortunately, this is one of the dangers in terms of preaching for biblical theologians — preaching based on biblical theology is always going to the big events and always discounting the smaller, human, ordinary elements of things.

I'll give you another example. It would be maybe the killing of Goliath by David. Okay. So a biblical theologian looks at that even and he says, "Oh, isn't this great. Little David kills big Goliath, and David is the ancestor of Jesus, and so this is a foreshadowing of what Jesus will do one day when he kills the great devil giant, and those kinds of things" — which is all wonderful and true, okay? But they usually don't focus very much on that very poignant scene when David is given Saul's armor and he tries to put it on and it's bulky and big, and he just says forget this, and then he says this line, "I'm going to go in the power of Yahweh, the power of the Lord, rather than in the power of Saul and his armor." Okay? Well, why is that? Why don't we focus on that? Well, it's pretty ordinary. I mean, it's just a young boy trying to put on a man's armor.

**Student: It didn't fit.**

**Dr. Pratt:** It didn't fit, okay? So no big deal, right? Let's get to the real important stuff and that is that the little boy killed the big giant. And actually, that scene in the book of Samuel is so very important because it is the memorable and in some ways even laughable scene of this little boy trying to put on this big huge armor and Saul actually thinking that this will help him out. And it sets up the big contrast between Saul and David. Saul is one who trusted in his armor and David is one who trusted in Yahweh, and so you don't want to ignore those kinds of things. You don't want to ignore the fact that Esther was told that if she did not rise to the occasion and take a step out for the people of God, that it wasn't as if God's people would be destroyed, it's just that God would get somebody else. Okay? You don't want to ignore those kinds of ordinary events. And so I guess we have to admit that biblical theologians can't say everything in the Bible, and so if you're going to have to choose and you're going to write a book about the theology of the Bible, you're going to talk about the big events. But when we preach and when we teach based on biblical theology, we never want to allow the extraordinary events of the Bible to so overshadow the

smaller events, because that's where real people live. Where do you live your life, Jean? In the great mighty acts of God or in the ordinary acts of God?

**Student: Definitely not. In this present world.**

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right, in this present world where things are very ordinary.

**Student: Absolutely.**

**Student: We change diapers...**

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. And wash clothes, get up and eat, and things like that. See, that's where real people live. And so teaching and preaching the Bible has to be reconnected from that abstract, great mighty act of God down to real life, and that's why the Bible does it itself.

### Question 7:

**Do Christians always reformulate theology in response to culture?**

**Student: Richard, in the lesson you said Christians have always reformulated theology in response to culture. Is that truth consistent?**

**Dr. Pratt:** Is it the same all the time?

**Student: And everywhere?**

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, that's a great question, because we usually talk that way, don't we? Evangelicals always talk about God's unchanging word and a changing world. I mean, how many books have been written with that kind of byline in it — the unchanging truth in a changing world? And we do want to say that's true. There are senses in which truth is truth no matter who you are, where are, or what time of day it is, or what universe you're even in for that matter, I guess. We'd have to say when God speaks, when God reveals himself, he does so out of his own character, and his character doesn't change, and so there is real truth to saying that truth is always truth. Now having said that, that's not the same as saying that good theology is always the same. Because I think that the basis of having a theology to begin with is not to teach the truth of the Bible — emphasis on the truth of the Bible — it's to teach the truth of the Bible effectively. In other words, it's to communicate the truth of the Bible.

Remember that when Jesus gave the Great Commission, he didn't say "Go ye therefore and read the Bible to people." He said, "Go therefore and teach all nations." And there's a big difference there, because as you go from nation to nation, or culture to culture, or time to time, you have to teach the same body of truth — say that's the Bible — in different ways. This is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians of course, that "I

became all things to all people so that by all means I might save some,” because as he went from one group to another, he had to stress different things, he had to emphasize different things, and because we can’t always emphasize everything all the time, we’re always prioritizing, always setting up what we’re going to focus on. We have to learn how to do that in relation to the people we’re trying to reach with the Gospel. And so, given that kind of motivation for theology, that the Great Commission is the reason we do theology — whether it’s biblical theology or not — we’re always responsible to formulate in a way that will communicate. Otherwise, we’re just doing it for ourselves. I mean, being a theologian is a spiritual gift. Much like the apostle Paul told the Corinthians that if you’re speaking and tongues and no one’s there to interpret it, go home and speak in tongues. Edify yourself at home.

And in some respects, the same thing’s true for theology. If you’re speaking about theology in ways that don’t edify, in other words, people can’t understand, go home and do it, because theology is designed to communicate what the Bible teaches effectively. And to do that, we always have to be reformulating theology, because the priorities, the effects of sin, the issues that people face, the needs that they have, they’re changing constantly throughout history, and they are different in different parts of the world at every single time. So it’s not to say that there’s no truth that we’re aiming toward, there’s no absolute that we’re striving to understand, but theology is always short of that. Theology is always a process of application. And so when you’re living in the world of the Neo-Platonist, you present Christianity in Neo-Platonist terms. That’s what they understand, that’s what they like, that’s how sin has arisen in their lives, so you’re answering their questions, much like Paul did when he was in Athens quoting Greek poets. He didn’t say, “Now this isn’t quite true because I’m quoting a Greek poet.” No, he quoted the Greek poets in 17:28 of Acts, and he did that openly because he was trying to address their needs. But when he talked to Jewish communities, he is quoting the Bible all the time and referring to prophecies as they understand them, and all those kinds of things.

So it’s just a matter of emphasis, a matter of priorities, a matter of taking into account where people are. That’s the sense in which we always reformulate. And you remember that the issue for biblical theology is that it rose to prominence in the modern world after the Enlightenment, because one of the key principles of the Enlightenment was the best way to understand anything, including religion, is to understand it in terms of historical development. And it’s not as if that were a brand new idea, but for Neo-Platonists, for example, that historical development’s really not all that important. What’s most important is the abstract. So when you’re speaking to a world where historical development is the central issue philosophically, culturally — when you’re living in a world of Darwin or you’re living in a world of archeology and those kinds of things — of course, to speak to that world, you have to speak about the way the Bible developed, too.

**Question 8:****Is it dangerous to reformulate theology in response to culture?**

**Student:** Now Richard, aren't there dangers in doing this, though? I'm thinking of the obvious syncretism that has taken place with the Roman Catholic Church moving into Latin America. Talk about that.

**Dr. Pratt:** Well that's not the only example. Syncretism is the danger. If you're going to adjust your theology to meet the needs of the cultures and the people at various times and places, you're always going to run into the problem of syncretism, of mixing Christianity with things that are not Christian. But let me just start off by saying we always do that. We just cannot avoid it, because we all bring ourselves to the process of theology, and because none of us is perfect yet — the only person that didn't syncretize his religion with others was Jesus I suppose, and maybe we'd have to say Bible writers when they were under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But when we talk about ourselves and the church's theology, we all know that syncretism is always the great danger. My favorite quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson is "A man sits as many risks as he runs," which means that if you sit down, you're risking just as much as getting up and running; it's just that you feel safer. Well, when you try not to address the issues of the day, you may feel like you're safer, but you're really not. You're actually quite syncretistic. And so it's better to acknowledge it and to go ahead and do it as best you can. Now in Haiti, where you're from, syncretism is obvious, right?

**Student:** Very much obvious, especially within the Catholic Church there is a lot. For example, you have saints that are the patron saint of a city, and during festivities all of that is brought in together with all the voodoo ceremonies and different things like that that goes on. And the people, they are, I would say, nominal Catholics, but at the same time they are celebrating the saints or doing the Mass, they are still doing...

**Dr. Pratt:** It sort of gets mixed in with the magic and that sort of thing?

**Student:** Absolutely. Into a lot things.

**Dr. Pratt:** Now, you know it's easy as Protestants to point the finger at Catholics and say they're doing that, but do the Protestants in Haiti do this?

**Student:** They do it as well.

**Dr. Pratt:** Uh huh. I mean, if nothing else, they're at least becoming syncretistic with American values.

**Student:** Absolutely. Yes.

**Dr. Pratt:** Because it's the Protestants that are down there doing their thing — American Protestants — and so they become like us, singing the songs we sing and having the values we have and things like that. I just think we have to admit that that's the case. Other cultures mix their religion with things like magic and things. We, as North American Protestants, tend to mix ours with the golden arches, meaning free enterprise, individualism, money is important, those kinds of things, which is just as syncretistic. But biblical theology was attempting to make the Bible's theology relevant to a world that was moving in the direction of historicism. See, that's the key. And that's why it grew so fast, that's why it's become so important, and it's also why it has been able to provide new insights. And yes, is it somewhat syncretistic? Well, of course, all theology is. But still, at the same time, the reason for theology is to communicate according to the ways people think, where they are, and when they are. And so I think we just have to admit that that's the case.

### Question 9:

#### What is the difference between critical and evangelical biblical theology?

**Student:** Now Richard, can you give us the difference between critical biblical theology and evangelical biblical theology?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, that's a very critical issue on this lesson, isn't it? Because I really do try to trace out the differences between these. And let me just start off by saying that we're taking two things as if they're utterly different and utterly separate that are really on a continuum here. There's more evangelical biblical theology and more critical biblical theology, so it's not as if these are utterly distinct things. But for the sake of discussion, the basic difference is belief about the inspiration and authority of Scripture. There are people who do what they call biblical theology who do not believe in the authority of Scripture, or "sola scriptura" as we are prone to say in our circles. And then there are others that do biblical theology, this historical approach to theology and the Bible, who do believe in the authority of Scripture. And that makes a big, big difference, because, well — in a number of different ways — but the main way is this, that people who believe in the authority of Scripture believe that it tells the truth about history so that when the Bible says things like Jesus was born of a virgin we believe it's really true. When the Bible says things like Jesus resurrected from the dead, we believe that's actually true.

And so when we talk about acts of God as evangelicals and want to focus our theology on these great and mighty acts of God in the Bible, we're talking about real space and time. Critical biblical theologians came under the heavy influence of archeology and scientific research during the Enlightenment period and after to the point that they no longer believed that the Bible told the truth about most things, in fact. I mean, I think if you were to talk to most critical theologians today, they would say that the Bible, well, has the authority to tell the truth that the telephone book has.

In fact, they would probably argue that the telephone book probably says more truth than the Bible does, because they question all of its historical claims and only believe those things that can be validated by archeology and science and those sorts of things. And so they have a process that is dependent on history, but they don't believe that the history of the Bible is true, what we would call true or real history, space and time history. And this leads them then to a quandary — and I'm sort of summarizing hundreds of years of thought on this — but it leads to a quandary. If you don't believe that the Bible tells you the truth about history, then how are you going to base Christian theology on the Bible anymore? How are you going to do this? And an evangelical will quickly say, well, you can't, so throw away your Bible. But they're not going to throw away their Bibles.

For one thing, their jobs depend on continuing to use the Bible, and they still have churches that people go to, and they have, as they would call them, simple-minded lay people who still believe these things, and they don't want to destroy all of that. And so what started developing in critical circles was a concept of “*Heilsgeschichte*,” or redemptive history. Now by this they didn't mean, as we often do when we say redemptive history, things that happened in real space and time that had redemptive significance. What they meant was a way of talking about your faith, a way of talking about your religion that was history-like. It was sort of an expression of ancient people's religious feelings. So, for example, the crossing of the Red Sea. There are different theories among critical scholars, but one theory is that what actually happened at the Red Sea was a group of about 70 slaves made it across a body of water near the Dead Sea on rafts, and then the Egyptian army followed them on their own rafts, but a storm came and destroyed the Egyptian army, and so now these simple-minded ancient people developed the story into God opened up the waters for us, we walked through on dry land, then he destroyed the Egyptians, and it gets bigger and bigger and bigger as they tell the story over and over and over again. And this becomes their salvation history, which is not so much a reference to real events but a reference to their feelings and their religious sentiments. And those sentiments then become the resource of biblical theology when you're in critical circles.

### Question 10:

#### Why do critical biblical theologians value *Heilsgeschichte* or redemptive history?

**Student:** So Richard, what good is the *Heilsgeschichte*? What good is that then if it's not real history?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, that's a really good question, and that's the question that I've asked many of them before. I think, in a word, basically this is it: most critical scholars have reduced religion down to a sort of common human experience that gives us psychological support, gives us moral support, gives us a place to lean on in life when you have doubts and fears and troubles and, for some of them, even gives them hope



that there is such a thing as a God and an afterlife, and things like that. And so — this is to put the best spin on as possible — these critical scholars are wanting to connect to that religious consciousness of ancient Israel. They're wanting to learn their joys and their pleasures and their exhilarations. They're wanting to learn how to express these feelings — and I do mean feelings — feelings of God in their own lives today by using the various myths and various stories and things like that that ancient people used. Because they're westerners, they tend to use that biblical tradition rather than, say, some other tradition like Hinduism or something like that. And they would put it that way. They're trying to connect the inter-psychoic connection between themselves and the ancient people of Israel and the early Christian church. And it really does get down to that. These people, therefore, in their liturgies in church will talk about the resurrection of Jesus, and they'll talk about his death, and they'll talk about his miracle birth and all these miracles that Jesus performed, or even Old Testament miracles, as if they actually happened. They won't stand up in church and say, "Now, we know that didn't happen." They'll talk about them as if they happened, but in their studies they know it didn't happen. And so they're giving people the ability to connect on that inter-psychoic level, and that's why *Heilsgeschichte* became the object of concern in critical biblical theology.

### Question 11:

#### Why is it important to realize that the Bible records actual history?

**Student:** Well, the question is obvious then, why is it so important that the Bible is giving us an actual history?

**Dr. Pratt:** It's important for evangelicals and for me personally because if these things did not actually happen, then we are without hope in the world. If the Bible is just another record of the way ancient people used to feel about God and now we know better, then we are in deep trouble. Because you can feel all kinds of things. I feel all kinds of things all the time; I have these inter-psychoic experiences with people all the time. I share the miseries and the joys and the hopes of humanity all the time in my life, but we are resting our faith, like the Bible does, on real historical facts. When Moses sang the song at the Red Sea, he was not making it up. He was not taking what actually happened, 70 people on a raft, and making up that God had opened the waters. He actually saw it with his own eyes. When the gospel writers talk about the life of Jesus, they're talking about things that they, as John puts it — I touched with my hands, we have touched, we have heard, we have seen. We know this is real, and reality is something that, in my opinion, the Bible bases faith commitment on, historical realities, and not on made-up events or traditions of events that reflect the human religious consciousness.

### Question 12:

#### How can we prove that the Bible records true history?

**Student: Richard, how do we substantiate the fact that these are actual truths and facts that we can prove, and this is not something that we just believe? It's just a matter of faith? How do we make that known to the critical biblical scholar?**

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, evangelical scholars do that all the time. They argue whether or not there's archeological evidence for the Bible. We try to convince people that there have been many situations where they have discounted the Bible's record, but time as proven that it actually did happen the way the Bible says. Of course now, there are many things in the Bible that you could never prove. Okay? I mean, how could we ever prove apart from the Bible that the water opened up rather than a group of seventy people on a raft? You can't do that. Nobody took a video of it or anything like that. But there are plenty of other things that scientific people have discredited in the history of biblical interpretation that have proven to be true later on as more research came in. And as those things happened, then the credibility of the Bible's witness overall, including those things that you could not really validate like miraculous things, axe heads floating on water, things like that, they become more credible as the more ordinary things are validated, the more ordinary historical claims. Because you get the very strong sense then that Bible writers would not have been basing their theology on made-up things. This is not Alice in Wonderland. This is real history, and the more that the verifiable things of the Bible story can be validated by legitimate means, by empirical means, then the better we are at then helping people understand that even the miraculous is true. But it does take a work of the Holy Spirit. Okay? And that's where it comes down to, because people will believe anything except the Bible to keep from having to reckon with God. I've seen that so many times, it's unbelievable. They'll believe the most ridiculous explanations, the most elaborate and complex explanations of things in biblical studies to avoid having to deal with the God of the universe face to face, and that reality keeps them sometimes from even accepting the most obvious kinds of empirical data that we can bring to bear on these issues.

### Question 13:

#### How did Hodge's view of evangelical biblical theology differ from Warfield's view?

**Student: Richard, can you talk a little bit more about the distinction between Hodge and Warfield? I don't know that I caught everything that was going on there.**

**Dr. Pratt:** It's a hard one. Let's see if we can back up just a little bit and say this: We're distinguishing between critical biblical theology and evangelical. The critical biblical theologians are the ones that don't believe that what really happened, or what the Bible says happened, actually happened. So they have their *Heilsgeschichte* over

there. Okay. So let's push them aside for a moment and stick here in the evangelical track. Now there are many people who are evangelicals who have used the term biblical theology, and for convenience sake, what we do in the lesson is we zero in on probably the most prominent of those, at least in North America, and that's as it developed at Princeton Theological Seminary. Okay. And that means first Charles Hodge. That was a big step. And then the next step is B.B. Warfield. And then there is a step beyond that with Geerhardus Vos. And in some ways, this is not the heart of the matter, but it helps us understand why people thought this way and how things have moved to where we are today. I think that's all that's important about this.

Hodge looked at the Bible much like a bubblegum machine with all kinds of different colors of bubblegum in it and little balls of bubble gum, and that the task of a systematic theologian was to empty out the bubblegum machine and take all the yellow bubblegum and put them in the yellow box and take all the blue ones and put them in a blue box, and the green ones and the orange ones, and put them in all these different parts of a box that had compartments in it. You'll remember that basically the movement of those bubble moved this way, the little balls of gum move that way on the video. Well, we're just thinking about a little different metaphor here. And the reason for this was, he looked at the Bible basically as, to use modern terms, as a database for theology. It had dogmatic statements in it. It had propositions in it that you would either find explicitly in a passage, or you could derive or infer from a passage. And if a passage talked about the doctrine of God, well then it was a yellow one, so you put it in a yellow box. If another passage talked about the sinfulness of humanity, a blue ball let's say, he took that out and he stuck that there. So you would categorize all these sort of relatively loose data of the Bible.

The reason Hodge thought that way was because he was operating with a Kantian view of natural science, which was the popular way of doing things in his day, and that was basically that the world around us has all this raw data and that the role of the scientist is to put it into categories in his mind, to categorize the raw data that's out there. So the Bible's the raw data of theology, and you put it in its right categories. Okay. Well, fundamentally, there's probably not a whole lot wrong with that so long as you qualify it in certain ways as Hodge and his practice actually did, though not in theory. In his systematic theology he actually described it as sort of bits and pieces that the theologian organizes.

Now Warfield comes along. He was the successor of Hodge and systematic theology eventually, but before he became a systematic theologian officially, he was New Testament scholar. That's a problem, because when you start reading the Bible, the neat system that Hodge created begins to fall apart, or becomes a little more complicated. Because Warfield, knowing the New Testament, realized that the New Testament itself had already organized the teachings of Christ and the teachings of the apostles. And in fact, the Old Testament had organized the teachings of our faith and that this organization needed to be recognized, as you go through the process of making systematic theology and then even biblical theology, it needed to be recognized, that the Bible wasn't like a big bubblegum machine with all these

different little colored balls in it that just stick into the right hole. Rather, they had systems within the Bible itself. You can think of the bubblegum pieces as sort of stuck together; water got in there and clumped them there together and clumped some others together, and clumped some others together inside the big glass sphere. And Warfield was enough of a Bible scholar to realize that was the case, that Paul had a theology, and that John had a theology, and Matthew had a theology. In fact, Warfield actually said there are many theologies in the Bible. Now that was a radical step, that there wasn't just one theology in the system of theology in the Bible that the systematician discovered, but rather the Bible itself actually had multiple theologies in it. So yeah, Matthew had his theology, but it was different from John's — not contradictory, but different. And Paul had his and it was different from Peter's. And you mustn't break those systems apart to do systematic theology, for Warfield, but you have to accept those systems. You have to embrace them and then try to find the sort of mega system that embraces all of them. That was Warfield's notion of what systematic theology did.

Now for Hodge, biblical theology was just doing basic exegesis of the little balls in the bubblegum machine. That's all it was, figure out what the passage says, now you take that dogmatic statement and stick it into the right hole. For Warfield, it was understanding all those little pieces according to their systems of Paul's theology, of John's theology, of Luke's theology, of Matthew's theology, Isaiah's theology, and understand them in terms of their own theological structures. Does that make sense? How they batched together? That's what he called biblical theology. In other words, it wasn't just doing basic exegesis, but it was actually figuring out the mind of Paul, the mind of Luke, the mind of Isaiah. And when you saw how they organized their thinking, that's what he considered to be biblical theology. And then you took all those clumps and brought them into systematics. And so what that opened up was all kinds of insights into the Bible that people really, in broad terms had not seen before. I mean it used to be, literally was true, that people would think of the Bible as a book that was given by God and that had very little organization to it in terms of its thought, in terms of its system. And then when they thought of it having a system, they thought it was just one big system that God had ordained. But now Warfield is saying no, no, there are many different systems in there, and what systematic theology has to do is take those little systems that BT, biblical theology, discovers and create this mega system out of all of them. And so that's the difference.

**Student:** So B.B. Warfield basically would say that there is sort of a symbiotic relationship between biblical theology; there's a sort of interaction between...

**Dr. Pratt:** Well no, I don't think so. I think it's still very linear. He still thinks you move from the Bible to biblical theology, discovering all those various clumps of bubblegum, and then you take that and then systematic theology has to bend a knee to that. He still thinks biblical theology is closer to the Bible itself. I'm the one that believes in the symbiotic, okay? Everybody else believes it goes like this: You go Bible, biblical theology, systematics. Then I'm the one that says no to that. I hate to say that because I'm about the only that says that. But I think the key here is just that

Warfield thought it was already organized at this stage of biblical theology, and that became very crucial to the difference, and it just opened up vistas of new insight that people hadn't had before. So rather than trying to coordinate everything that Moses said with what Isaiah said, people began to say, well, what did Isaiah say? What was his theology? What's his distinctive characteristic? What did he emphasize? What did he give priority to? What was his vocabulary?

If you think about it just in terms of vocabulary — this is a good way to think about it, though it's more complex than this. The old model of Charles Hodge would be this: We find a vocabulary word, a theological term in the Bible and it sits there like one little separate piece of bubblegum, and I've got my categories over here in systematic theology, and I'm going to take it and stick it in there. Okay? Like the word justification. There's a passage that says somebody's justified. So, okay, it goes into the category of justification. Now what Warfield said was that little ball has been organized in certain ways by Bible writers into a whole theology. And I think all of us know that James used the word justify differently than Paul did. So James has got his theology over here using the word justified in one way. Paul has his theology for...it's a little more complex than this, but let's just say simply in this way, okay? And so Warfield says now what systematic theology has to do is deal with both of those, so that as you move towards a systematic doctrine of justification, it's got to include what Paul said and what James said. Now in theory, that's sounds very nice, very simple. But unfortunately, systematic theology has a life of its own that for centuries different Christian traditions have defined words like justification in particular ways, and they have not always embraced all the variety of the Bible's use, and then the rub comes. And so what Warfield did was open up great vistas. And that's the basic distinction. If you think of them as loose data for Charles Hodge to get stuck into systematic theology because of exegesis or biblical theology, or you think of them as clumps of these balls that biblical theology discovers that get then put into systematic theology. But in all cases, systematic theology has to submit to what the biblical theologian, whichever form you take, what he discovers.

### **Question 14:**

#### **What was Vos' view of evangelical biblical theology?**

**Student:** Okay, now I do understand the difference between Hodge and Warfield. Can you talk a little bit more about Vos and his perspectives?

**Dr. Pratt:** Oooh. Yeah, and I think...Let me just say this, that it's important to understand why I talk about Vos. Vos was the first person in the North American scene ever to hold an official chair of biblical theology at Princeton, but it had grown so much because of the work of Warfield that it actually wanted to become its own department. It never quite became its own department, but he was actually the chair of biblical theology. This is what Vos was. And so it is important to sort of get the difference between him and Hodge and Warfield. So let's just retrace here for a

moment. You go from Hodge having all these little data bits that you do biblical theology on which is identifying what color they are by basic exegesis then bringing them over to systematic theology. Warfield said, no, the bubblegum is in clumps because every Bible writer has his own theology, and that's the role of the biblical theologian is to discover the clumps, and then you bring them over to a mega systematic theology that incorporates them all. Well, Vos was not satisfied to say that there are many theologies in the Bible. He wanted to ask the question, what unifies all of those different theologies. He didn't deny that there were different kinds of theological systems in the Bible. I mean, who could possibly do that? How could you deny that the system of theology for Paul is not contradictory but different from James, or better, Paul from Isaiah or the writer of Chronicles? Obviously there are differences there, though they are not again contradictory in an evangelical point of view.

But Vos was concerned to say, is there something that unifies all of these? Is there something that makes them cohere together? Is there a mega system in the Bible itself in other words? Is there something underneath all of this variety that biblical theology is discovering that can bring a unity to it in biblical theology so that biblical theology more or less would be able to discuss the whole Bible in a unit. And his answer was yes, there is. And his answer was this basically. There is a thread, a golden thread that runs through every single theological system of the Bible from Moses in Genesis all the way through to John in Revelation, and this is the thread — redemptive history. Now on the one side you sort of go, okay, I can see that. The Bible is about history so you can think of the clumps of bubblegum that B.B. Warfield discovered — various systems of theology in the Bible — and think of them, as it were, attached to a string and surrounding a string so that this long string called history, redemptive history, has these clumps of theology around it. But what was unifying them all is that string of history.

And so history started becoming the focus, and redemptive history especially, meaning the great and mighty acts of God, became the subject matter that Moses was talking about. It became the subject matter of Isaiah. It became the subject matter of Paul. It became the subject matter of John and of Peter and of James. But they're all talking about basically the same thing and that is this history that's running through the whole Bible. And Vos thought he had found the key in many respects to the unity of the Bible. With all of its diversity, there is a unity, and the unity is that all of the Bible writers are theologizing, they're making theological reflections in different ways on this one thing, and that's the mighty acts of God in history. Well, on the surface of things, who could debate that? Because that makes good sense doesn't it, on the surface of things? But in reality, there are some questions that need to be raised about it, and it's certainly not the only way that a person could talk about the unity of all the theologies of the Bible.

**Student: I think his favorite nickname for biblical theology was historical revelation.**

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. The history of revelation. That's right. And in fact, John Murray often refused to use the word biblical theology and wanted to call it theology of redemptive history because it's not particularly biblical. It's a slice of the Bible. It's a way of looking at the Bible, which is what we'll argue as we go through these lessons. But that is the key. So when you hear people talking about the Bible from this Vos approach, they're keenly concerned with, what does this passage say about that golden thread of history? What does that passage say about that golden thread of history? Let's say you're preaching this way, if you don't take them to redemptive history, if you don't take them to some big event that occurred in biblical history, then you're not doing your job. And later on as this develops, it becomes the great event of Jesus and his death and resurrection. That becomes the focus. So every single passage in the Bible then becomes suddenly talking about Jesus and his death and resurrection, which is where we are today, where most evangelical biblical theologians are saying every single passage in the Bible is doing this kind of a thing. It's somehow talking about Jesus of Nazareth, or so-called Christocentric or Christ-centered preaching and teaching, and you're not doing your job unless you have somehow taken this passage, connected it to history, that thread, and traced that history up to Jesus.

### Question 15:

**If we focus entirely on Jesus and redemptive history, what might we miss?**

**Student:** Now that sounds great and wonderful, and I probably would do that in the pulpit, but what am I missing if that is my primary focus?

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, you're missing so many things that it's hard to even number them all.

**Student:** Give me one example.

**Dr. Pratt:** Well, let me just say it this way. Sidney Greidanus did a study of preaching in the Reformed Church of Holland, and part of what he did in that study — it's called *Sola Scriptura*, it's actually a dissertation of his many, many years, decades ago. One of the things he did was he compared the style of preaching, one being moralism and the other being redemptive historical. Now you understand when I say redemptive historical it means doing this, this passage talks about the thread and takes you to Jesus. And one of the things he noticed in all of that preaching and teaching was that it was highly objectified. The preaching and teaching reaches its zenith when you are talking about an object; the object is redemption in Christ. And so your practical application of the sermon was, think more about Jesus. Okay? Think more about Jesus. And preaching never came down to, now tomorrow when you get up in the morning, this is what you need to be thinking about and doing with your life and feeling with your life; this is your relationship to your husband or to your wife or

to your children or to your boss or to your employees. None of that was ever preached about because that was considered moralism, and moralism was sort of a taboo word. Because in this view, every Bible writer is not doing moralism, every Bible writer is talking about the thread of redemptive history and tracing it up to Jesus, and that's what preachers out to do, talk about objective history and bring it up to Jesus and you're finished. Well the results, of course, was that you had lots of people going, "Wow, that's a very interesting passage and I never knew that Jesus was there before, now I do," and going home and not knowing what to do about it.

We do have things like that going on even in our circles today. They substitute the word "gospel" often for Christ in that system, that every passage must be brought to the Christian gospel or to Christ as the Savior, that kind of thing, which is fine. It is a part of what we do when we preach, but it's not all that we do. We haven't reached the Zenith. And the problem is that often that kind of Christocentric or gospel-centric preaching is so objective that it becomes abstract for people's lives. It doesn't touch where they actually are. Now I think that when we look at the New Testament especially — but it's even in the Old Testament — when you see how they often, and they are talking about redemptive history, but what they do with that is they talk about what you're supposed to do tomorrow morning, how you're supposed to tie your shoes, whether or not you're supposed to work...

**Student: Raise your children.**

**Dr. Pratt:** ...or how you're supposed to raise your children, how you're supposed to be compassionate to people. These are very practical or daily things that you find in the epistles of the apostles. And that seems to me to be the big thing that we miss if we take this redemptive historical center and reduce the Bible down to that string. Even if you take it up to the end of the string — Jesus. And there's another thing that's very interesting about this approach. It's interesting that when go from these clumps of bubblegum on the string — you go from the clump to the string — we're talking about something that God did and this somehow anticipates Jesus up here. But oddly enough, in most preaching, it's only talking about the first coming of Jesus. It's very seldom that you hear people talk about the second coming of Jesus and the implications of it for that. And they certainly don't talk much about the in-between time, which is the more practical side of this. What do we do in between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus? And so I think a lot is missed in preaching and teaching when you have this as your exclusive approach, as great as the insight was, because there is sense in which all of the Bible is about this progressive revelation of God, this evolving revelation of God, this developing revelation of God that climaxes in Jesus — not just his first coming, however, his second coming, too. And so when we do this, I think we have to be very careful not to take an approach and treat it as "the" approach.



### Question 16:

#### Why are both act and word revelation important?

**Student:** Now Richard, when evangelicals typically use the word revelation, they're talking about word revelation, and it seems that with BT we have this change where now we're talking more about act and word revelation. Could you talk about that?

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, it is a change. It is a shift at least of focus. And you can understand why, because in systematic theology, what are you interested in? You're interested in ideas, and the ideas sometimes are pretty abstract, actually. And so revelation is God disclosing things about those ideas, and so it has to do with words and phrases and sentences and things like that that God uses to tell us what to believe about things. And so word revelation, that is, God speaking about things, even in Scripture because it's words, that becomes the centerpiece, almost to the point that we forgot that God doesn't just reveal himself in words, but God also reveals himself in actions. Now why do you think biblical theology emphasizes the acts of God as revelation?

**Student:** Because it's focused on history.

**Dr. Pratt:** Because it's focused on history, exactly. So, if you agree with Vos that the thread that runs through the whole Bible is history, redemptive history, then God doesn't just disclose himself in words, he discloses himself in actions. And I think it's fair to use the human analogy. I mean, how do we know each other? Well, we will ask questions of each other. We'll say, "Where are you from?" and you'll respond with a word or sentence or something like that. "What do you do?" We talk about things, and so we learn about each other. You self-disclose in language. But if a person is asked the question, "Are you a nice person?" and the person responds, "Yes, I am a nice person." Alright, now that's a self-disclosure. But if the person then does something that's not nice, we might wonder whether or not the words were true. And why would we do that? Because the action of the person, as we even say often, speaks louder than the words. So the action of the person is also self-disclosing.

And that's the way it is with God, too. God doesn't just reveal his mind to us, but he also reveals himself to us by acting. And when you look at words in the New Testament and in the Old Testament, like *galà* in the Old Testament — that means "reveal" — it often does not speak about God talking about things, or Bible writers talking about things or writing about things, but rather God disclosing himself by doing something. We gave an example in the lesson itself that when God reveals himself to the nations, he does so by destroying them basically. He doesn't stand up there and say, "I am God" in some verbal declaration. Instead, he demonstrates what it means to be God by doing something. And that is very critical in biblical theology. The act revelation and the word revelation, those two go together in evangelical biblical theology.

**Student:** I see. So as an example, you would say the act of creation, God creating the world, would be an example of God revealing himself through action, and then the description, the biblical description that follows would be revealing himself in word.

**Dr. Pratt:** Yes, that would be exactly the kind of distinction we want to make. Now there are other levels that we could go at that. For example, in Genesis 1 itself, it actually says that God said certain things at that time back then about the creation that he had made. Remember what he said?

**Student:** “It is good.”

**Dr. Pratt:** “It is good.” That’s right. So the event of making it and then God’s words about it, It’s good, it’s good, it’s very good, that becomes very critical to a biblical theologian, both of those things. What is God doing and what is God saying? And oddly enough, sometimes, even spokespeople for God, spokespersons for God like angels, or even people, these become vehicles by which God’s word is revealed. And it’s very interesting even when you think about Jesus as the Word of God, John 1, that as the Word of God, he is not just the one who teaches the truth verbally, but he embodies the truth, he lives the truth; he acts in ways that reveal what God is like. Jesus didn’t say, “If you have learned my lessons, you have learned about the Father.” What did he say? “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father,” which has to do with a much bigger picture than just his teachings. And so when you look at a Gospel like Matthew where he is constantly juxtaposing Jesus’s teaching with the miracles that Jesus did, back-and-forth, back-and-forth, back-and forth. He is operating with this idea that the revelation of God in Christ is both word revelation and act revelation. The Sermon on the Mount would be what kind of revelation?

**Students:** Word revelation.

**Dr. Pratt:** Word revelation, that’s right. But then the miracles that he performs right after the Sermon on the Mount are his act revelations.

**Student:** His response to John the Baptist when John the Baptist doubted. That’s another example of him using actions, saying, “Look at what I did.”

**Dr. Pratt:** That’s right, take a look at what I’ve done. That’s disclosure also. And so these two have to go together, and the conjunction of these two is what biblical theologians emphasize. It’s not as if this is brand new because this is something that was known forever among Christians, but it’s the emphasis on the pairing of these that becomes so central to biblical theology. They’re not just interested in learning abstract truths about God. They want to know how those truths of God are, as it were, incarnated in acts of God, brought into real history. And that is central to the whole program of biblical theology.

**Question 17:**  
**How is act revelation “radial” and “ambiguous”?**

**Student:** Now Richard, in the lesson you talked about the fact that we need word revelation because act revelation is “radial” and “ambiguous.”

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, I mean, we don’t talk that way very much, and it can be problematic for people, because I think most of us sort of assume that when God does certain things in Bible history, first we can understand it, and then we even go further than that and think that we’ve understood all of its significance. And that’s what those two words, ambiguous and radial, are pointing out here, first that we don’t often understand bare facts the way that they should be understood. They’re not clear as to what their significance is. They’re ambiguous. And then the fact that they are radial means that their significance is so great we could never understand everything about them.

So let’s just talk about those two for a moment and see if we can’t get it. When we say that God’s acts are ambiguous, we certainly don’t mean that their significance or meaningfulness is ambiguous to God. God understands them. He understands them fully, completely. But the problem is that when something happens in the world as an act of God, whether great ones or little ones, extraordinary ones or ordinary ones, we often don’t know what to do with them. We don’t know how to understand their significance. Robert, have you ever been in a situation where something has happened and you don’t know how to take that as a sign from God as to whether you should go this way or that way?

**Student:** How many times do you want me to recount?

**Dr. Pratt:** This is the reality, right? We often face this situation in our personal lives when you think of an open door. Okay, so an opportunity comes up. Alright, there’s an act of God, an opportunity, a door is opening. This is a small personal example, but now is that door that’s opening up a temptation for you to stumble and fall? Or is this door opening up an opportunity for service? You see, that’s the problem. Without somebody explaining to you what that is, you’re left with some ambiguity. You don’t know exactly what to do with it.

So here we have a situation for example — here’s one in the Bible. Abraham was living in his day and there was a famine in the Promised Land. Okay. Now that’s all the Bible says, that there was a famine in the land. Now this was an act of God, we know that. And normally in the Bible famines are connected to judgments of God against a place, and I guess if I were pushed and really had to give an answer, I would say that probably this was a curse of God for some reason. I don’t know exactly what the reason would be, but it was a curse of God. But the Bible doesn’t tell us. It doesn’t explain why there was a famine, what anyone had done to create this famine. It just says there was a famine. And for this reason, even though we might be pushed

toward thinking, well, it was because somebody did something wrong, we would be open to the possibility that it was just one of those things that happened, that God just made it happen as a famine like he has other famines occur on the earth without blaming anybody, or even trying to figure that out. So that's what I mean when I say ambiguity.

Take for example something that we just consider crystal clear as to its significance, the resurrection of Jesus. Now see, when you think about the resurrection of Jesus as a Christian, it's hard for us to sort of get out of our skin and think for a moment — now wait a minute, that's an ambiguous event. If I don't have somebody telling me its significance, I don't know what its significance is. Now as someone from Haiti, in Haiti people rise from the dead all the time, don't they?

**Student:** They do.

**Dr. Pratt:** They do indeed.

**Student:** I have never been to Haiti.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. You need to go there so you can understand the ambiguity of rising from the dead. Because there were plenty of people in Jesus' day who were explaining his resurrection along those lines. "Well, the guard stole the body." That was one word that tried to explain what happened. "Well, he wasn't really dead." Or, "Maybe he rose from the dead like lots of people have risen from the dead. In fact, we've heard of that Lazarus guy; he was raised from the dead by Jesus himself." So, was Lazarus' resurrection, did that prove that he was the Lord of all creation? No. So there is some ambiguity in the act itself. It's not as if the act speaks for itself, especially all the layers of theological reflection that the New Testament puts onto the resurrection of Jesus. And that's a great example because we are often so inundated and so accustomed to thinking about an act of God in the Bible in a particular way that we don't realize that without the teaching of the Bible, the word of the Bible, the word revelation, that that event itself can be very ambiguous. Okay, so there's the one side of ambiguity. And there are lots of events in the Bible that are like that.

Now the other side of it is not that just events in themselves are sometimes quite ambiguous to human beings, but also that events are radial, and by that I mean it's more or less like a radio wave. Do you know why we call radio waves radio waves? It's because they are radial; they go in every direction. And they're not directional signals. They go out in every direction. So they impact everything in every direction. So that's more or less the way events are. When an event takes place in the world, depending on your philosophy of how events connect to each other, there's the potential of huge implications and effects on all kinds of other events in every direction imaginable. I mean, the fact that we're sitting at this table is keeping you from being home. And you've turned off your telephone so you're not taking phone calls. Now who knows what effect that may have on countless people out there in the

world today? So your being here does not just affect our making this program, it affects other things as well that we don't even recognize.

We give the example in the lesson of the crossing of the Red Sea and how it probably messed up the fishing industry for quite a while, and how...can you imagine the psychological trauma it caused the Egyptian children whose fathers died in that event, and the wives whose husbands died in that event? I mean, there are implications and effects of events that just go in every direction imaginable. And so what we find in the word revelation of God is that the word revelation helps us narrow down what kinds of effects and what kinds of significance we're supposed to contemplate and at least take as our main concern. So when you think about the resurrection of Jesus, this made the women who came to the tomb, the empty tomb, happy. Now, how important is that? Are there other significances, or is that it? The Bible even tells us that it made them happy. They ran with joy. Is there any other significance to that event of Jesus's empty tomb? His resurrection?

**Student:** Well, many, like it's an indication of God's promise to us of our resurrection, but we don't know that.

**Dr. Pratt:** That's right. Was that written on the wall?

**Student:** It wasn't.

**Dr. Pratt:** It was not written on the wall. Do you think that the two women that saw the empty tomb that they thought that that was, "Oh, man! Now we know that our resurrection is secure because Jesus was resurrected"? Do you think it was self-evident? No, it took some teaching and some understanding of that. That's the point. So the word revelation of the New Testament is all about explaining what that even meant, what its significance meant. And as it radiates out like this, its significance moves in all these different directions, it touches this person in this way, it touches that person in that way. It moves in this direction so that, for example, if you were an unbeliever and you learn that Jesus was resurrected from the dead then it would have the implication for you, it would have the impact on you that, my goodness, Jesus really is the judge like he said he was. I need to repent of my sins and come to him.

For the Christian whose Christian mother just died, like in Thessalonians when people were dying unexpectedly, it had another implication, and that was don't worry about them, they're not going to be left out of the resurrection. In fact, they'll be in front of you, because this is the way it goes: Jesus, then those who have fallen asleep, and then you. So it has all kinds of implications because it has this kind of radial significance, and we look to the revelation of God in words in the Bible to help us understand what those ambiguous and radial events actually should mean for us.

**Question 18:****How do epochal shifts correspond to periods of increased revelation?**

**Student: Richard, describe for me again how epochal shifts correspond with the rises in biblical revelation.**

**Dr. Pratt:** Yeah, that's important, because later on we're going to see that this idea of epochal shifts is central to biblical theology. So let me see if we can just back up and say it this way. In the Bible, acts of God don't come at a constant rate; they don't come at a constant speed, so that the history of the Bible is a simple upward curve like that. It's not that way. Instead, what you find is just sort of like mountain peaks and valleys. It goes up and down in different ways at different times; God is involved and then God isn't so involved, God is involved, God isn't so involved. And the funny thing about it as you look at the Bible is that as God moves through history, he's taking history to new stages of revelation, and it's not as if you've got this stage and it's disconnected from the next, but rather you have this stage of revelation, and then there's this increase of God doing things that takes everybody involved with God, or everybody involved in God's kingdom to a new level. And then things go along for a while, and then there's this huge increase of God doing things, and then it takes them all to another level.

**Student: Would that be like the Exodus following a period of slavery?**

**Dr. Pratt:** That's exactly right. So there are these events that come along, and conglomerations of events, and then even word revelation gets wrapped in there. They increase. And that moves the whole system of Bible theology to sort of a new stage. The word epoch simply means age or period of time. The older word was dispensation — and there's nothing wrong with saying that word, it's a perfectly fine word — that the Bible has different dispensations or different periods of times, or different epochs. And if you were to think about it, for example, we have the period of time before sin comes into the world. So certain things are revealed by God, and it's fairly status quo until you come to, boom!, sin. And then you get all these new revelations about what sin is going to do to you now, and God talks about all of this, all this, and all this. And things go along at a pretty even pace until, boom!, you get the next thing which would probably be the call of Abraham, the choice of Israel as the special people of God. And a lot of revelation occurs, God does a lot of things in words and in actions and explains things a lot, and so you're moved to this new level, what we often call the patriarchal age or the patriarchal period. And then as you move forward in that, you get this kind of lull as Israel is in Egypt for several hundred years. Nothing is really happening, nothing is really being said much to them, and so the Bible kind of skips over that a little bit and summarizes it in a snapshot and then, boom!, all of a sudden here's Moses. And with Moses comes new acts of God and new words of God that take Israel to a new stage. You're no longer to be slaves, now you're to be moving back into this land, taking control of it. You're now a great nation, not just tribes but a great nation. And so what's happening is that waves are

going up and down here, but every time there's this major surge of act and word revelation, then you have the people of God, the kingdom of God, Bible faith, Bible theology being taken to a whole new level that it had never reached before.

**Question 19:**  
**Doesn't God constantly provide revelation?**

**Student:** Well, how can we say revelation rises and falls and surges when God reveals himself all the time?

**Dr. Pratt:** That's a good question. Because it does sound that way, doesn't it? It sounds like we're denying that God is revealing himself all the time. I guess we have to just make that qualification. We have to qualify first that God is always revealing himself in general revelation, so we know that everything that happens, no matter what it is, is a revelation of God's character, his invisible attributes, Romans 1, and his moral demands on humanity. So we know that this is true, so there is a sort of constant baseline, I guess we'd have to say. We could also say that, I guess, the earlier distinction we made between more extraordinary acts of God and more ordinary acts of God, that when I say there are these surges, it's concerning, and concentrating on these extraordinary acts of God. But I'm sure that in individuals' lives when they were in Egypt — we just said that was a low point, slavery in Egypt — I'm sure that God was revealing himself to people, individuals and groups of people of Israelites in a very dramatic way for them. This is not to say that God is inactive in individuals' lives or groups of people, but by comparison, you wouldn't want to say that a father receiving an answer to prayer in Egypt for his son who had fallen down that day and broken his leg, even if it was a miracle that occurred that the son's leg was suddenly healed, you would want to say that's of less dramatic significance than the crossing of the Red Sea.

Now how do you measure significance? That's another story. I guess we'd have to say because the Bible doesn't talk about that very much, it's probably not as important as what it does talk about. But apart from that ambiguity, we do want to say that these are the more extraordinary acts of God that occur. Boom! And it pushes things forward. We use the analogy of a tide coming into a beach. You know, the tide comes in and moves further and further up the beach, but it doesn't come in at an even pace. It comes in as waves hit the beach, and when that wave hits the beach, it pushes things a little bit forward, and then it goes back. Then another wave comes and it goes in a little bit farther. And then the next wave comes and it goes a little bit farther. And that's more or less the analogy we're trying to bring here. When God moves his people to new periods of time where there are substantial, significant changes in the way he relates to them, the theology that they are to believe, their understandings of things, the ways they're to behave and feel about him, those new stages come with surges of divine revelation. This is one of the things that Geerhardus Vos emphasized in his biblical theology.

And of course, as you think about it, the greatest period of time in the Bible's history when there was a low level was between the Old and New Testaments when Israel was being punished by God by removing revelation from them, by removing these kinds of things, and so nothing much was happening until here comes John the Baptist, and then here comes Jesus, and there's this sudden surge of the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus. Now things are kicked into the new stage called the New Testament. So I just think we have to recognize that revelation has not been constant but has moved from sort of age to age with these surges.

### Question 20:

#### How should shifts in revelation influence modern application?

**Student:** Richard, I'm thinking now how do I apply this as a pastor? And can you just talk about how to take these surges, the rises and falls of God's revelation and apply that knowledge to the person in the pew who's suffering today?

**Dr. Pratt:** What difference does that make? Well I think, let me say, two ways. One would be sort of on a larger scale and then on the more personal level. On a large scale, any time you look at any passage in the Bible, you've got to ask the question, what period, what surge, what epoch is it talking about, because there is an integrity to the epoch. Now there are fuzzy edges on each side, at the beginning and the end of each epoch, but as you're inside of this period of time, God is doing things in a particular way, and he's expecting particular kinds of responses. And if you're living in another age, you're not supposed to be responding exactly like people back here were responding in their age. Now you can go crazy about that and say that they're so different you can't connect them at all. That wouldn't be the case. But for example, if you were living in the days of Moses, you were supposed to worship at the tabernacle and make your sacrifices at the tabernacle. Well, now we live in a day after Moses, let's say, another period whatever it may be — David, in between the testaments, now and the New Testament. We're not supposed to go to a tabernacle and make sacrifices any more. So I think that that's one practical lesson that every time we use any Bible passage, we've got to ask what's the system of theology that's in operation within that epoch when that passage is given to the people of God in the past and make the right kinds of adjustments for people that we're ministering to today.

The other thing to say, I think, on a more personal level for people is that even in our personal lives, God is not "steady as she goes" in speaking to us, in leading us, in showing himself to us, and there are times in our personal lives — we call them, dry periods or the dark valley of the soul, those kinds of things where you feel as if God has left, and then you have other times when you have heightened experience of God and those sorts of things. This is the nature of relationship with God. It's much like a human relationship. If you have constant and intense, steady-as-she-goes relationship with another human being, you'll go nuts. Human relations have that kind of back and



forth to them; even husbands and wives and children and parents have that kind of back and forth. And that's the way it is with God and his connection, or our experiences of him, go back and forth like that, too, on a very small scale.

So I think that part of this surging can help people by analogy anyway to understand what's going on in their lives; there are times when God is very active and deeply involved in a person's life, and then there are more ordinary times. Sometimes people ask me this question, they say, "How often should I feel an intense experience of God?" And that's a good question. And there's no easy answer, but I will say this, basically, we ought to hope that we have it at least once a week. I mean, that's what going to church is all about. That's what Sabbath is all about, to have a day when you are in the presence of God in a way that you're not normally there. And anyone who says that they are praying when they're at work like they pray when they're in church is either not praying at work or not praying at church. It's one of the two. And if somebody says I experienced Jesus's presence with me when I'm changing diapers the way I do when I'm in a worship service, well then they don't know what the experience of Jesus is, because it is a dynamic thing. On that personal level, I do think that's a very important thing to keep on saying to people.

### **Question 21:**

#### **How is the history of revelation "organic"?**

**Student:** Now Richard, you spoke about the history of revelation being organic. Can you talk about that a little bit?

**Dr. Pratt:** It's an obscure word, isn't it? It's not one we use very much. I think the idea is basically this, that just like we normally think of everyday life, the hours of a day are just ways in which we make separations or divisions of something that really can't be utterly divided. I mean, let's face it. You think about it's now 9 o'clock, now it's going to be 10 o'clock, it's going to be 11 o'clock. Well, we know that's something of an artificial construct that we put onto something that flows the whole time. Okay? And it's that flow that we're talking about as being organic. So the history of the Bible is that way. The theology that's revealed by the special acts of God and the words of God are also organic in the sense that they develop out of each other; they flower out of each other rather than being, God does this and now he does something completely separate from that, and then he does something completely separate from that. These are things that grow into each other. That's a wonderful thing to realize about the Bible, because if anybody reads the Bible with much seriousness at all, they realize that the faith that is taught in the early parts of the Bible is very different from the faith that's taught in the later parts of the Bible. I mean, let's face it. Anybody who comes to you and says, "Last night God spoke to me and told me that I'm supposed to sacrifice my child today," what would you do?

**Student:** Smack 'em.

**Dr. Pratt:** Smack them. Call the police. Call them crazy. Whatever, right? But you realize that there was a time when God did that. In the life of Abraham when God did that, no one was supposed to take him to the police or anything, or even stop him. To do that would have been to disobey God. So in that sense, Abraham's faith is very different from our faith today. If we can't recognize that, then we are not realizing just how much the Bible grew over time, how its theology grew over time, and how new revelations always had an effect on prior revelations.

The organic character of this is also a part of this idea that new revelations are not just added on top of old revelations, but they seep down into the old ones and transform them, give them new significance, give them new meaning, like liquid being poured into liquid, so they mix together and they grow, as it were, like a flower grows. I mean, think of your own body. You know, we're told that every seven years every cell of our body has been replaced. So does that mean that you're a completely different person? In one sense yes, but in another sense no. You're still the same person as you were seven years ago. So now the question is, the Bible is growing like our bodies, is it a completely different religion early on than later on? No. It's the same religion, it's just a religion that was revealed gradually and slowly by God for a variety of reasons: One, and primarily because I think people just couldn't take very much, and God was accommodating people's ability at the time where they were in the history of the world. And so it gradually and slowly, organically develops. Now you've known people I'm sure, Rob, that want to throw parts of the Bible away because it doesn't match up with their own faith. Have you seen people like that?

**Student:** I have, yeah.

**Dr. Pratt:** You know, there are lots of people in the world today who use lines like, "Well, that's just the Old Testament." And they throw it away. They act like it's irrelevant because it's in the Old Testament. This view of revelation is different. An organic view of the history of the Bible is different from that. It says you can't throw it away because it's earlier. But at the same time it says you can't go back to that earlier stage as if you lived there either. Instead, you have to move forward with the Bible and see it's development over time and let that organic growth come to you as well and to realize where you are in that organic growth. It's a wonderful thing that biblical theology has done in this respect, because there are groups even here in America, for example, who have tended to chop the Bible into separate periods of time and say, "That part's irrelevant, that part's irrelevant because it's earlier. Now we're in the New Testament. We don't need all that Old Testament stuff." Well, biblical theology has broken lines among Christians right here, because biblical theology has seen that the Bible treats past history differently than that. It doesn't say it's irrelevant. The New Testament quotes the Old all the time, and biblical theologians of all varieties and stripes of systematic theology are now able to see the relevance of earlier things in the Bible for later periods of time, like the New Testament.

And that's one of the great gifts of biblical theology that we ought to be delighted to know about and delighted to explore, because in some ways, the faith of the New Testament — that tiny little part of the Bible that's about that big — it's like a black and white sketch. It has no color because it gets color, its dynamic from the Old Testament, and that color has got to be brought in and it's being done that way in many different circles.

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**Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host)** is the President and founder of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including *Pray with Your Eyes Open*, *Every Thought Captive*, *Designed for Dignity*, *He Gave Us Stories*, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles* and *Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*.