

*PREACHING THE WHOLE BIBLE AS CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE:  
THE APPLICATION OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY TO EXPOSITORY PREACHING*

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A Book Review

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by

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## Introduction

The author, Graeme Goldsworthy, is a retired lecturer in Old Testament, biblical theology, and hermeneutics at Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia. His other books include *Gospel and Kingdom*, *The Gospel in Revelation*, *Gospel and Wisdom*, and *According to Plan*.

Goldsworthy debated Paul Blackham (Associate Minister of Theology at All Souls, Langham Place in London) at Duke University on March 23, 2001. The topic was "faith in Christ in the Old Testament, and more specifically on the clarity of the gospel presentation in the Old Testament."<sup>1</sup> Goldsworthy's written response to the debate helps us get to know the man behind the present book:

When I want to stir up my troops in the Biblical Theology class at Moore College I question them on how the saints of the Old Testament were saved. I tell them they were saved only by faith in Christ. If that doesn't stir them up enough I then go on to say that the saints of the New Testament were saved by fulfilling the Law. That usually gets them going. Both are true, I firmly believe, for the Law was fulfilled for us in Christ and our faith is in his doing and dying for us.

When Paul and I met on Monday I was greatly relieved to find that I wasn't going to be facing a suave Brit with an Oxbridge accent and stiff horn-rimmed glasses and a steely-eyed glint and so on, but as we sat down and just talked together I felt that we could have been sitting in the pub at Ballykissangel (a fictitious city in a British television series). We came to the conclusion straight away that one thing we wanted to avoid was the idea that there is any serious division amongst evangelicals over this issue. We both agreed that we have a passion to proclaim the Old Testament as a Christian book.<sup>2</sup>

## Summary

"The aim of this book is to provide a primer for preachers that will help them apply a consistently Christ-centered approach to their sermons." Goldsworthy goes on to say, "In part one my aim is to stand where the evangelical pastor-preacher stands and to ask the sort of questions that the preacher would ask about the Bible, biblical theology, and preaching. In part two I seek to apply the biblical theological method to the various genres of biblical literature, all the time with the preaching task in mind" (ix).

Goldsworthy states, "What then, does the term 'biblical theology' convey? From the evangelical preacher's point of view, biblical theology involves the quest for the big picture, or the overview, of biblical revelation. It is of the nature of biblical revelation that it tells a story rather than sets out timeless principles in abstract. It does contain many timeless principles, but not in abstract. They are given in an historical context of progressive revelation. If we allow the Bible to tell its own story, we find a coherent and meaningful whole. To understand this meaningful whole we have to allow the Bible to stand as it is: a remarkable complexity yet a brilliant unity, which tells the story of the creation and the saving plan of God. Preaching, to be true to God's plan and purpose, should constantly call people back to this perspective. If God has given us a single picture of reality, albeit full of texture and variety, a picture spanning the ages, then our preaching must reflect the reality that is thus presented" (22). Goldsworthy builds on the work of Geerhardus Vos, professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Seminary in the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Vos was "a Reformed theologian and one of the most distinguished representatives of the Princeton Theology . . . sometimes called the father of Reformed Biblical Theology."<sup>4</sup> Paul Enns' definition of biblical theology has less emphasis on "story" than Goldsworthy's does, but a similar emphasis on historical context:

The term *Biblical Theology* is used for that *methodology* that takes its material in an historically oriented manner from the Old and New Testaments and arrives at a theology. It is exegetical in nature, drawing its material from the Bible as opposed to a philosophical understanding of theology; it stresses the historical circumstances in which doctrines were propounded; it examines the theology within a given period of history (as in Noahic or Abrahamic eras) or of an individual writer (as Pauline or Johannine writings).<sup>5</sup>

### **Critical Evaluation**

The author states in the Introduction, "I have, for better or worse, come to the conviction that the position of traditional historical Christianity is the most consistent. My position is one of reformed and evangelical theology" (xv). It is helpful for readers to know the theological perspective of the author, though some will argue that "traditional historical Christianity" is not synonymous with "reformed and evangelical theology." It may limit the value of the book among those who are offended by reformed, Calvinistic doctrine. Saying that he has come to his theological position "for better or worse" is a disarming note of humility that may soften the blow for readers who are not reformed or evangelical in their theology.

The author helpfully writes, "Religion does not consist in human beings seeking after God, as is popularly stated. Rather the biblical picture is of God's revealed truth being challenged by idolatry. It would appear from Paul's treatment of the subject in Romans 1:18-32 that religion is in fact the ultimate human endeavor to avoid the truth of God that is everywhere evident in us and all around us" (16). "Once again it is a biblical-theological perspective that strengthens our conviction of the one way of salvation. Biblical theology should assist us in avoiding the worst kinds of . . . relativism" (17).

The title of chapter nine asks, "Can I preach a Christian sermon without mentioning Jesus?" The author writes, "Why would you even want to try to preach a Christian sermon

without mentioning Jesus? Is there anywhere else we can look in order to see God" (115)?

Goldsworthy states further: "While the temptation in preaching will be strong to proceed directly from, say, the godly Israelite to the contemporary believer, this method will inevitably produce distortions in the way we understand the text. There is no direct application apart from the mediation of Christ. That is the theological principle that I have wanted to emphasize in this study. While . . . the direct approach will produce nice thoughts . . . even edifying ones, we simply cannot afford to ignore the words of Jesus that the Scriptures testify to him" (116).

"The key question of interpretation is, 'How does this text testify to Christ?' . . . (Do not) ignore the ultimate purpose of God's word, which is to proclaim Christ to a lost world . . . . We return to our original question: 'Can I preach this sermon, lead this study, discuss the meaning of the daily Bible reading, without mentioning Jesus?' The simple answer, based on the principles discussed thus far, is a resounding . 'NO!' No Bible passage yields its true significance without reference to Jesus Christ in his gospel. That is so basic that I sometimes wonder why we even need to raise the question" (122). During a lecture at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Dr. Herschael York stated that he was confident that he occasionally preached a sermon without mentioning Jesus. To illustrate the legitimacy of such a sermon he said by way of analogy that when you visit the home of someone from India, there may be no curry in the meal that night, yet you can smell it in the air. So, it is argued, may Jesus be present in a sermon that does not mention Him.

In Part Two ("The Practical Application of Biblical Theology to Preaching") on preaching from the genre of wisdom literature, I was surprised to encounter the author's words regarding Job: "It is not even clear that the narratives intend us to take the person of Job as a historical character. Given that this is a wisdom book, the bulk of which is written in poetry with

a very stylized structure, it is arguable that the purpose of the book is served whether or not the account is historical. In this regard we might compare it with the parables of Jesus" (190).

I wonder what it is in the author's theology that makes him need or want to throw this hypothesis out to his readers. Ezekiel 14:12-14 and 19-20 says, "And the word of the LORD came to me: 'Son of man, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it and break its supply of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it man and beast, even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness, declares the Lord GOD'. . . . 'Or if I send a pestilence into that land and pour out my wrath upon it with blood, to cut off from it man and beast, even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, as I live, declares the Lord GOD, they would deliver neither son nor daughter. They would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness.'" If Job is not historical, then maybe Noah and Daniel were not either. Someone could say, as Goldsworthy did in the case of Job, "It is not even clear that the narratives intend us to take the person of (Daniel) as a historical character. Given that this is a(n apocalyptic) book . . . it is arguable that the purpose of the book is served whether or not the account is historical" (190). And what of James 5:11? "Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." James gives no hint that Job is non-historical. *Easton's Illustrated Dictionary* says of Job, "His history, so far as it is known, is recorded in his book."<sup>6</sup> We know Job lived one hundred and forty years after his latter blessings (42:26). We know that Job is quoted in Romans 11:35 and First Corinthians 3:19. We know "Job died, an old man, and full of days" (42:17). All this says, "Historical!" to me. Further, the author bases his speculation on an inability to know authorial intent! As quoted above: "It is not even clear that the narratives intend us to take the person of

Job as a historical character . . ." (190). Goldsworthy's (in my view unnecessary and dangerous) speculation on Job may be costly as it may chip away at his credibility among some readers.

Also in Part Two on applying biblical theology in preaching the psalms Goldsworthy quotes Gerald Wilson: "That Psalm 1 is the introduction to the Psalter explodes the common view that the Psalter was the hymnbook of the second temple. Whatever their original purpose, the psalms are no longer to be sung as human response to God but are to be meditated on as the source of the divine word of life to us."<sup>7</sup> Goldsworthy does not jump on board completely with Wilson, but says, "If he is right in this, it marks a move in emphasis from the psalms as response to a canonical sense of revelation in God's word" (210). Would I be sinning if I sang Psalm 1? What if I sang to the Lord Psalm 68:4 ("Sing to God, sing praises to his name. . .")?! Is such a view that I can and should sing the psalms so bad that it "explodes" under Wilson's scrutiny? What was God's intent (and the psalmist's intent) as author of the Psalms? Did God's intend and mandate a change from "sing the psalms" to "meditate on the psalms"? Is not the truth on both sides? Must we polarize? Can we not sing *and* meditate on the psalms? I think God is pleased when we do: "I said, 'Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart'" (Psalm 77:6). "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16).

I very much appreciated Goldsworthy's comments on applying biblical-theology to the preaching of genealogies. Now I have one more answer to the tiresome comments about how boring and unnecessary genealogies are: "The genealogy is the perfect antidote to a moralizing character study. Here is the reason why exemplary sermons on biblical characters can easily miss the point. It is not their exemplary value but their place in the theological plan of God

culminating in Jesus of Nazareth that is the most important thing" (225).

### Conclusion

The author undertook to introduce biblical theology to preachers by addressing questions about biblical theology that preachers may have (part one) and then applying biblical theology to the task of preaching the various genres of the Bible (part two). The second part especially will be a frequent resource to which I will turn when preparing to preach. I will refer to those pages to help keep myself on track with regard to biblical theology and genre considerations that may inform my exegesis.

Graeme Goldsworthy states, "I want to conclude this study of biblical theology in preaching by summarizing the structure of revelation as it affects the understanding of key characters and themes in the Bible. Between the two extreme parameters of creation (Genesis 1-2) and new creation (Revelation 21, 22) we have a marvelous, divinely crafted structure or plan of salvation that centers in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. The focus of salvation history is the people of God and the dealings of God with them to bring them to himself" (246).

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.duke.edu/~aa13/theology/Goldsworthy.html>. Website accessed on June 26, 2012.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing Company, 2007), 70.

<sup>4</sup>[http://www.theopedia.com/Geerhardus\\_Vos](http://www.theopedia.com/Geerhardus_Vos). Accessed on June 28, 2012.

<sup>5</sup>Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989). This quote was accessed on June 28, 2012 at <http://www.biblicaltheology.com/purpose.html>.

<sup>6</sup>This quote from *Easton's Illustrated Dictionary* was accessed from WORDsearch Bible Explorer 4 CD-ROM, no copyright date given.

<sup>7</sup>Gerald H. Wilson, *The Shape of the Book of Psalms* (no publisher listed), 138.