Dabney Center

Fall '03

Biblical Theology

Lecture #2

Review of Biblical Theology as Story Theology:

Biblical theology means:

1. Reading the Bible as a narrative

   Looking at the Bible in a narratival fashion means we always keep in mind eschatology. God always intended for the creation (and especially humanity as the crown and representative of creation) to grow and mature. Adam's fall sent the story off course, but God used that sinful twist in the plot to manifest his glory in an even greater degree. In redemption, God restores the created order to the plan that he intended for it all along. In the incarnation, the Storyteller writes himself into the script to set the story straight.

   To do biblical theology, we must be able to grapple with the overall "plot" of Scripture. It is helpful, then, to read other stories outside the Bible to get a feel for how stories work. Every (good) story has a kind of eschatology – some kind of plot resolution at the end. After the fact, we can look back and see everything throughout the story was pressing towards that final resolution.

   A wonderful example of this sort of thing is Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Tolkien's imaginative mythology provides a kind of analogue to the "true mythology" of Scripture. Towards the end, Sam Gamgee asks Gandalf, "Is everything sad going to come untrue?" This essentially, is the gospel. The sad things in the world are truly sad. The fall really happened. But there is also hope that the story will have a happy ending after all, and, in fact, the world will be a more joyous place at the last for having once endured sadness. Tolkien coined the term "eucatastrophe" to capture this aspect of biblical theology.

He said the gospel sanctified the "happy ending," thus fusing legend and history.

The happy ending of world history has broken into the middle of history through the death and resurrection of Jesus. His cross and exaltation were the beginning of the end, but there is a final end still to come. This is the narrative dynamic of the biblical story, and indeed, of the Christian life. Christians believe in a sort of time travel – the future has traveled back into the present. We are called to live now as we shall then. Just as we live from back to front, so we have to read the Bible from end to beginning.

Sayers captured all this well: "The dogma is the drama." Or perhaps we should say, "The drama – the story – is our dogma." Biblical religion is not a philosophy or ideology. It is a story.

2. Finding the church in the story (or stories) of Scripture

We have to learn to find ourselves in the biblical narrative. The biblical story is *our* story. We must locate the place of the church within the biblical storyline as a whole, as well as in the Bible's individual stories.

Once again, Tolkien is helpful. In the trilogy, several of the characters have a sense of bring part of a larger drama, of fulfilling prophecy, and so forth.

In the classic hermeneutics text, *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine starts with the basic principle of *totus christus*: the whole Christ, head and body. To find Christ in the story is to find the church, and vice versa.

Of course, this means reading Scripture *typologically* (something we'll come back to in a future session).

Part of our present cultural crisis is our loss of story. People no longer believe they inhabit a "narratable world," that is, a world in which the flow of events have meaning and direction. It doesn't seem like history is *going somewhere* any longer.

Robert Jenson explains the implications of this for the church and her mission:

“If there is little mystery about where the West got its faith in a narratable world, neither is there much mystery about how the West has lost this faith. The entire project of the Enlightenment was to maintain realist faith while declaring disallegiance from the God who was that faith's object. The story the Bible tells is asserted to be the story of God with His creatures; that is, it is both assumed and explicitly asserted that there is a true story about the universe because there is a universal novelist/historian. Modernity was defined by the attempt to live in a universal story without a universal storyteller.

The experiment has failed. It is, after the fact, obvious that it had to: if there is no universal storyteller, then the universe can have no story line. Neither you nor I nor all of us together can so shape the world that it can make narrative sense; if God does not invent the world's story, then it has none, then the world has no narrative that is its own. If there is no God, or indeed if there is some other God than the God of the Bible, there is no narratable world.

Moreover, if there is not the biblical God, then realistic narrative is not a plausible means for our human self-understanding. Human consciousness is too obscure a mystery to itself for us to script our own lives. Modernity has added a new genre of theater to the classic tragedy and comedy: the absurdist drama that displays precisely an absence of dramatic coherence. Sometimes such drama depicts a long sequence of events with no turning points or denouement; sometimes it displays the absence of any events at all. Samuel Beckett has, of course, written the arch-examples of both, with *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape*. If we would be instructed in the postmodern world, we should seek out a performance of Beckett-the postmodern world is the world according to Beckett.
The arts are good for diagnosis, both because they offer a controlled experience and because they always anticipate what will come later in the general culture. But the general culture has now caught up with postmodernism, and for experience of the *fact*, we should turn from elite art to the streets of our cities and the classrooms of our suburbs, to our congregations and churchly institutions, and to the culture gaps that rend them . . .

[I]f the church does not *find* her hearers antecedently inhabiting a narratable world, then the church must herself *be* that world.

The church has in fact had great experience of just this role. One of many analogies between postmodernity and dying antiquity-in which the church lived for her most creative period-is that the late antique world also insisted on being a meaningless chaos, and that the church had to save her converts by offering herself as the narratable world within which life could be lived with dramatic coherence. Israel had been the nation that lived a realistic narrative amid nations that lived otherwise; the church offered herself to the gentiles as their Israel. The church so constituted herself in her *liturgy*.

For the ancient church, the walls of the place of Eucharist, whether these were the walls of a basement or of Hagia Sophia or of an imaginary circle in the desert, enclosed a world. And the great drama of the Eucharist was the narrative life of that world. Nor was this a fictive world, for its drama is precisely the "real" presence of all reality's true author, elsewhere denied. The classic liturgical action of the church was not about anything else at all; it was itself the reality about which truth could be told.
In the postmodern world, if a congregation or churchly agency wants to be "relevant," here is the first step: it must recover the classic liturgy of the church, in all its dramatic density, sensual actuality, and brutal realism, and make this the one exclusive center of its life. In the postmodern world, all else must at best be decoration and more likely distraction.

Out there-and that is exactly how we must again begin to speak of the society in which the church finds itself-there is no narratable world. But absent a narratable world, the church's hearers cannot believe or even understand the gospel story-or any other momentous story. If the church is not herself a real, substantial, living world to which the gospel can be true, faith is quite simply impossible . . .

[M]odern Christianity, i.e., Protestantism, has regularly substituted slogans for narrative, both in teaching and in liturgy. It has supposed that hearers already knew they had a story and even already knew its basic plot, so that all that needed to be done was to point up certain features of the

> story-that it is "justifying," or "liberating," or whatever. The supposition was always misguided, but sometimes the church got away with it. In the postmodern world, this sort of preaching and teaching and liturgical composition merely expresses the desperation of those who in their meaningless world can believe nothing but vaguely wish they could."

Further Prolegomena to Biblical Theology:

Some "Bible basics" every biblical theologian needs to know:

What is the Bible? It is our canon.

What is the "canon"? "Canon" means standard or rule.

How many books are in the canon? 49 if counted as literary units (22 + 27)

How does "canon" function within community? A "canon" both assumes and creates a community of readers. Being a part of this community means reading the Bible as an "insider." It means reading the Bible within its own frame of reference.

Canonical structure: One covenant or two? Two testaments or four?

> The most common division of the canon, of course, is OT/NT. That scheme is helpful in that it reminds us of the cosmic new beginning effected through Christ's work. On the other hand, we should not exaggerate the distinction between OT and NT. The NC is simply the OC glorified and transfigured. Jesus' ministry was simply the next (albeit climatic) chapter in the unfolding story of redemptive history. In that sense, it would be better to speak of the Bible as a single covenant story.
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> But there can be other ways to look at the how the biblical story is organized. After all, our "NT" was not the first "NT" God gave to his people. The Bible was given, basically, in four phases, so there are four distinct stages in revelation: The Priestly-Kingly-Prophetic-Fulfillment phases.
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> Thus, there are different ways of "rightly dividing" the canon, each with its own strengths and weaknesses

Mapping out the Bible's deep narrative structure: the Bible as storybook

Having examined the Bible's deep canonical structure, we can turn to its deep narrative structure. We find here four distinct stages in history: Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation. These four major turning points in the biblical plot reveal the structure of the Bible's master narrative (which underlies all other smaller biblical narratives, and in fact, all stories anywhere).