

Biblical Theology Core Seminar Class 3: Defining the Tools

The first week we considered what biblical theology is. We said that is the discipline of learning how to read the Bible as one story by one divine author that culminates in the person and work of Christ, so that every part of Scripture is understood in relation to Christ. Barry Cooper, in his book *Can I Really Trust the Bible?*, likens the Bible to 66 different radio stations, with almost as many different styles of music (country, classic rock, pop, jazz, classical), but as you turn through them one by one, you find that they're all singing about the same thing, Jesus, each in their own way.

Last week we considered how biblical theology is a guardian and guide for the church. False "christianity's", lack a sense of biblical theology. Today we are going to ask, what tools do we need to study biblical theology? Think of today's class as getting a tour of a carpenter's workshop. There's the hammer. There's the blade saw. And what is that funny shaped thing?

In fact, we're going to rummage through two different tool boxes pull a few out one at a time, look at them, and figure out what they do. Unfortunately, we're not going to have the fun of trying out those tools today. That's for coming weeks. The goal here is safety first so that no one cuts a whole limb of the Bible off with the blade saw.

The two tool boxes are

- 1) *Exegetical Tools*: these help us to understand a text in its context and the author's original intent. In some ways the emphasis here is on the human author.
- 2) *Storyline Tools*: these help us discern where a text fits into the storyline of the whole Bible, and how it contributes to culmination of that storyline in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In some ways the emphasis here is on the divine author.

I. Tool Box # 1: Exegetical Tools

If you've ever been in to a Cracker Barrel restaurant, you've seen all the knick-knacks and funny signs for sale in the gift shop. I wonder if you've ever seen the

sign that has two sentences, the first sentence of which reads, “I got a new pepperoni pizza for my wife.” Now if that’s all you read, *what would you think the sign means?*

You would think the sign is simply indicating that someone bought a pizza for his wife to eat. But in fact the whole sign read this: “I got a new pepperoni pizza for my wife. It was the best trade I ever made.” I know, awful, right?

What’s the moral of the story here? Context is king. Meaning is not just a property of words, it’s a property of sentences. In fact, it’s not just a property of sentences, it’s a property of paragraphs. If you want to know the author’s intended meaning, you have to pay close attention to words, sentences, and paragraphs.

And that’s what we do with exegesis: we pay attention to words, sentences, and paragraphs. Exegesis is the disciplined attempt to lead out of a text the author’s original intent, rather than one’s own preference or experience or opinion. Jerome, an early church father put it this way: “The office of a commentator is to set forth not what he himself would prefer, but what his author says.” In fact, that is what all of us do, every day, as we exegete a variety of texts, from cook books, to instruction manuals, to Sports Illustrated, to your favorite blog.

A. Tool # 1: The Grammatical-Historical Method

Tool number one for this process is the grammatical-historical method - which seeks to answer the question: “What does that paragraph mean?” You start with a grammatical and structural analysis of the text:

1. How does the larger text break up into units?
2. What’s the subject, the verb and the object, and how do they relate. Basic sentence diagramming!
3. How are the sentences connected?
4. What’s the general flow of argument? I got a new pepperoni pizza *for* my wife. Notice the ambiguity of the preposition “for”?

And behind the text are a number of questions about the historical context?

1. Does the historical context (author, date, audience, and provenance), if known, throw light on your understanding of words or argument?
2. Is there a cultural context that you need to be aware of? E.g., what are

Pharisees; what rights did women have in the Roman world.

3. Are there issues of geography, politics or history that throw light on the meaning? E.g., where is Tarshish in relation to Nineveh?

(Commentaries, Bible Dictionaries, Encyclopedias and Atlases are extremely helpful here.)

B. Tool # 2: Literary Form

Closely related to tool 1, if not actually a part of it, is tool # 2: discerning a text's literary form—or genre. We intuitively recognize this. On the whole, poetry doesn't even look like a newspaper article. That's in part because poetry and news reporting belong to different genres, with their own unique set of internal rules. These rules and patterns have a real bearing on the meaning of the words and sentences an author writes.

There are multiple literary forms you need to take into account in Scripture: Narrative; Parable; Poetry; Wisdom; Prophecy; Epistles; Apocalyptic, and more. And the literary form will impact your approach to the author's intended meaning. The fact that the sentences about getting a pizza for one's wife belongs to the genre of "gift store junk that hangs in a guest bathroom" communicates that the author is simply trying to be funny.

Let's work through one brief example from the text: Psalm 143. Turn there. The final verse, verse 12, reads,

“And in your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies,
And you will destroy all the adversaries of my soul,
For I am your servant.”

Now, verses 1 to 11 are filled with the psalmist asking God for help: “Deliver me from my enemies...preserve my life...bring my soul out of trouble.” But here he's not asking, *what's he doing?* He's stating his trust in the fact that God will rescue him, which we know simply by the grammar, by the indicative: “You will cut off...you will destroy...” And how can he be so assured that God will do these things? For two reasons, and the answer is found in two prepositional phrases: “In your love you will cut off.” And then, “For I am your servant.” That last phrase provides what we might call the *ground*. “You will destroy...for I am your servant.” That's the ground of my assurance.

One last question about this text: what genre is it? Poetry, right. So how does this

affect how we interpret the word “enemies”? Do we read that phrase in the same way we would read the word, say, if we were reading 1 and 2 Samuel, which are historical narrative? Because we’re in poetry, we know that David is presumably alluding to a literal physical enemy—someone who is trying to do physical harm to him. But we suspect the term probably has broader applicability. It can be a physical enemy. It can be a spiritual enemy.

Okay, that’s just scratching the surface of the text. But that’s exegesis in motion. We were staring at the text in its context, and asking questions of it. The Core Seminar on How to Read the Bible goes into depth on exegesis means we don’t need to spend any more time here.

We still have another whole toolbox to open...

II. Tool Box # 2: Storyline Tools

Inside this second box are all the tools we need that will help us locate a particular text within the storyline of Scripture. Remember, in the first class, we said, every text needs to be measured and understood according to where it is with respect to the Christ event. I used the analogy of a newspaper article with the headline that read, “Nationals Win World Series.” And we imagined one paragraph in that article, say, paragraph 12, which describes how a relief pitcher entered the game in the seventh inning. Now, you might exegete paragraph 12 about the relief pitcher just right. But if you don’t then take the next step and explain how paragraph 12 relates to the whole story about how the Nationals won the World Series, you have really understood the significance of paragraph 12.

Well, the headline of the whole Bible, we said last week, is the gospel. Let’s say the headline of the whole Bible is “Jesus Wins!” The goal of opening up this second tool box is to figure out how any given text relates to that headline, “Jesus Wins.”

So let’s go back to Psalm 143:12 again:

“And in your steadfast love you will cut off my enemies,
And you will destroy all the adversaries of my soul,
For I am your servant.”

Now King David is saying this, as the ascription at the top of the Psalm tells us.

Where does this fit into the storyline of the Bible as a whole? What does that have to do with Jesus? What does that have to do with me?

A. The Key Is to Look Back and then Look Forward

The way to figure out where your text is in the storyline is fairly obvious: you look back, and then you look forward. Right now, I am re-reading the Lion, the Witch and The Wardrobe. I am at the point in the story where the Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy sitting with the Beavers. Well if you were to drop into this point there is a lot you would need to know about how on earth these four English kids were sitting in a beaver dam having dinner with some Beavers. So you need to go back and learn about a place called Narnia and a wardrobe. And then you look forward and see how this connects to the end of the story, which I won't give away.

How do we look backward and forward in Scripture. Well, we do that by picking up one of several storyline tools.

1. Plot

The Bible has a plotline. It tells one story through 66 books that, under the authorship of the Holy Spirit, all arrive at the same port: the person and work of Jesus Christ. This plot is not simply a literary device, but is an historical unfolding of the progressive revelation that culminates in Christ. According to Graeme Goldsworthy,

It is the nature of biblical revelation that it tells a story rather than sets out timeless principles in abstract. [The Bible] does contain many timeless principles, but not in abstract. They are given in an historical context of progressive revelation.

God did not choose to bring his Son into the world immediately after the fall. Rather, he chose to progressively reveal himself and his plan throughout human history. The result of revealing himself over time, and through the hard and happy history of Israel, was to ensure that when his Son did come we could recognize Jesus to be the fulfillment of all God was doing in history.

This means we can authentically integrate texts in the Bible with the message of Christ by rightly seeing their place in the plotline of the Bible. Texts are not

springboards or foils to get to Christ.

2. Theme

Another tool is theme. Good stories are held together by themes, and multiple, interweaving themes. And part of looking back and forward from any one location in a story is knowing how to trace the relevant themes backward and forward. When you know that Darth Vader is Luke's Father because you've seen the end of the second movie, you are going to watch the first movie differently because you're going to trace that theme. And you're going to watch for that theme throughout the third movie.

What are some of the primary themes of Psalm 143:12? God's love. The enemies of God's people. The theme of servant...Let's think just about that second one: the enemies of God's people. Standing here at Psalm 143, let's look back. Can anyone trace the theme of the enemies of God's people up to this point?

Surely the first enemy of God's people was the serpent. Close on the heels of Satan was human's own fall and then sinful nature. By Genesis 4, the story of Cain and Abel tells us that enemies include other human beings. But an interesting thing happens in Genesis 4: human divides into two lines, represented by two kinds of genealogies that are used throughout Genesis: there's the seed of the woman (Eve) and there's the seed of the serpent—God's chosen people and then all humanity. And some belonging to general humanity *often* tries to attack God's people. You see it in the rivalry between Isaac and Esau. You see it highlighted most dramatically in Pharaoh in Exodus. Then with the giving of the law, and the inheritance of the land, we discover that God's chosen people *are* the enemy of God. So he cuts them off in exile? So what does that mean about who the real enemy is?

Looking forward to Christ, I'm going to ask the question: which enemies did Jesus defeat? Each step of the way, we can see how God protects his people, his seed, from their enemies.

What are some other examples of themes? Well starting next week we are going to trace through some of those themes: They include covenant (how God relates to his people), kingdom (how God orders and rules over his people), exodus (how God saves his people), exile (how God punishes his people), and many others. These all find their fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Okay, let's pick up another tool:

3. Promise-Fulfillment

When we read our Bibles, we see that God is Promise-Making God and a Promise-Keeping God. Unlike us, he always keeps his promises. It is this conviction of the faithfulness of God that underlies so much of the Biblical authors frame of mind as they write.

We see in Scripture that the promises of God (prophecies in the broadest sense of the term) typically have multiple horizons of fulfillment. What's more, each successive fulfillment is not only later in time chronologically, but greater in significance both theologically and historically.

Let me give an example that illustrates both the multiple-horizons and the ever-greater character of God's promise-keeping. Consider God's promise to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3:

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

God promises that childless Abraham will be the father of a great nation that will bless the nations of the earth. A few verses later he promises to give Abraham's offspring the land of Canaan. Now consider how this promise is fulfilled:

- First, there's the miraculous birth of Isaac -> Jacob -> 12 Sons
- By the opening of Exodus, there a multitude of people, so many Pharaoh is intimidated.
- Joshua recounts the story of the nation conquering a land.
- By the time of King Solomon, the nations is prospering greatly by his wisdom.
- Of course, Jesus is the True Promised Offspring (Paul makes clear in Galatians & Romans). And by faith in Jesus, men and women from every nation are blessed, as they become children of Abraham, a spiritual nation that spreads to the very end of the earth, and yet like Abraham once again lives as aliens and strangers.

- But wait, there's more: a New Heaven and a New Earth - a great nation of all God's People under God's rule (Hebrews 4 and Revelation 21-22).

How many times was the promise to Abraham fulfilled? I count at least 5 times, all clearly identified in Scripture. And each time greater than the one before. So when we read a passage of Scripture, we want to see where/how it's fulfilled throughout the entire Storyline of the Bible. We could do the same with Psalm 143:12 and see how the Psalmist is resting on God's promises to cut off his enemies.

Sometimes to see promise and fulfillment is to see how the New Testament authors use Old Testament texts. The gospel writers some time make it explicit "This happened so that x would be fulfilled..." One of the greatest tools in biblical theology is cross-references.

4. Typology

Now, an assumption in this pattern of Promise-Fulfillment is that God not only speaks, it is assumed that he is also the Lord of History. He providentially orders events and even individual lives so that they prefigure what is yet to come. They exist as historical analogies that correspond to future fulfillment.

The biblical language for this is types, which simply means pattern or example. Typology is our next tool. To say something is a "type" of something else in the Bible means that you are asserting God intended to teach us about a second thing by connecting it to a first thing. Some event, person, or institution is organically connected by God's intent to something else so that the first things helps us to interpret and understand the second thing.

Listen, for instance, to Romans 5:14: "Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come." Paul does not simply drawing a comparison between Adam and Christ. He's argues for a historical correspondence in which the type, Adam, points forward to and finds it's redemptive fulfillment in the antitype, Christ. The former helps us to understand and even defines for us the work and meaning of the latter: both exercise a federal headship over the human race, one bringing death, one bringing life. Christ, then, doesn't merely repeat Adam. The type points forward to something greater than itself.

Now a type is not simply allegory that makes arbitrary and mere linguistic connections between symbol and the thing symbolized. For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Inn is the church, the innkeeper is Paul, the oil and wine are the sacraments, and so forth. Or the five stones that David picks up to slay Goliath represent faith, hope, love, and, uh, strength and honor. No, wait, that's Russell Crowe as the Gladiator. You see the problem with allegory? Another famous example is Augustine describing the scarlet cord that Rahab lowered from Jericho that saved her as the blood of Christ dripping from his body. There's a surface resemblance between the two things, but that doesn't make it a type.

I think the safest way to establish a type is to root it in the biblical text. Nowhere does the text say that Jesus is the scarlet cord of Rahab. But the text does refer to Jesus as last Adam, Abraham's Seed, new Israel, David's greater Son.

It also describes him as the Passover Lamb, the once-for-all sacrifice, the temple, the Good Shepherd, a king, a priest, the Rock struck by Moses, the true Exodus, the vine of Israel, the Lord of the Sabbath.

So we can look back at these institutions, persons, and events, and say that they are "types" of Christ. And again, *why is it important to say something is a type of Christ?*

It will affect how you interpret the person and work of Christ. To say he's the temple of God, for instance, tells us the Spirit dwells in him in a special way, and that he is the one through whom we draw near to God.

[Think about the text Mark is preaching on soon, what are the types in the passage? Luke seems to be using the Flood of Gen 6-7 in vv.26-27 to talk typologically about the final judgment or the coming of the Kingdom.]

Are there any types in Psalm 143:12? I think there are two: David and the servant. So you have the Davidic kingship theme, tied together in this Psalm to the servant theme, presenting with a connection that the people of Jesus' day didn't always see. David is the servant. *What happens when we trace this type forward?*

Well, we know the servant brings Jew and Gentile together from Isaiah 49, and that he suffers the sins of his people in Isaiah 53. And then we know that in Matthew 12, that the divine says of Jesus, “Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.”

It seems that Jesus is the servant to which Psalm 143:12 very much points. The Father loves Jesus. The Father will cut off Jesus’ enemies. He will hear Jesus’ prayers.

This leads us to a last storyline tool:

5. Continuity and Discontinuity

But the difference between promise and fulfillment cannot simply be explained as a movement from less to greater, or a difference of degree. Despite the continuity of the story, the movement from promise to fulfillment is described in Scripture as the movement between shadow and reality (Col 2:17), between a mere copy and the genuine article (Heb 8:5), between mere symbol and the truth it represented (John 4:23; 15:1). What that means is that in addition to continuity, there is significant discontinuity as we move across the epochs from one horizon of fulfillment to another.

And this is important because it means that the seed of a type or a promise points us to the fulfillment, but that fulfillment is the point of the story all along. It’s the reality, the substance.

We’ve already seen the continuity between Psalm 143:12 and Christ. What about discontinuity? Here’s something remarkable. How does Jesus play the servant? The New Testament is very clear. *He* is the one who is cut off as an enemy. Or rather, God rescues his people from their primary enemy, sin and death, by identifying his Son and servant with that enemy on the cross, and having his servant pay the full price of that sin. And then Jesus is given all authority in heaven and earth and declared king. That is how king and servant come together in the New Testament—not exactly what David had in mind.

Our basis for hope is not just in the points of continuity in the movement from promise to fulfillment; it’s in the discontinuity. Jesus would bring all these themes together in the utterly unique act of his death and resurrection. And it’s in him

alone our hope lies, not in any of his typological predecessors. My hope is not that I can be like David. It's in Christ alone.

Conclusion

Okay, so let's sum up the tool sets we need to really understand a passage of Scripture.

Biblical theology teaches us to start with the tools of exegesis. And then we move to the storyline tools of themes, covenants, promise-fulfillment, and typology, and these help us to mark off points of continuity and discontinuity.

To put it another way, we look down in our exegesis, then we look backward and forward in our biblical theology.

Ultimately, they help us read the story of a king and servant King, a Kingdom, and the King's relationship with his subjects. And see how this single story has God as both its author and primary actor, and that its center as well as its climax is the glory of God through salvation in Christ.