

The Whole Counsel of God

VOLUME 1

GOD'S MIGHTY
ACTS IN THE
OLD TESTAMENT



Richard C. Gamble

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P U B L I S H I N G
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Introduction to *The Whole Counsel of God*

ALL BOOKS ARE WRITTEN within a specific historical, theological, and biographical context. This one is no exception. The author's views have been shaped by his education in the United States and Europe and by his experiences as a seminary professor and Presbyterian minister. He has tasted the theological fruit of the Continental Reformed and British Presbyterian traditions, and has also learned to appreciate much of Anabaptist-Mennonite history and piety.

EXEGETICAL FOUNDATION

The title to this three-volume work may sound pretentious. While this is not a small work, in many ways fifty thousand volumes could not contain “the whole counsel of God”! The title is based on Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders, found in Acts 20:25–28.¹

Paul had called those elders together to meet with him and hear his final advice. Toward the beginning of his discourse, he told them that he would never see them again, and that he had harmed no one. Then he made a powerful statement: “For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will [*or counsel*²] of God.”

1. Acts 20:25–28, “Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”

2. Acts 20:27: “all the counsel of God” (KJV); “the whole counsel of God” (NKJV); “the whole will of God” (NIV).

An exegetical problem? When Paul told the Ephesian elders what he had done as an apostle (vv. 25–27), was he implying that they were to do the same things from that time on? That is, were the Ephesian elders to behave blamelessly, as Paul had done? The answer to the question is in the affirmative. While his explicit instructions do not begin until verse 28, it would not be wise to separate what Paul had done from what the Ephesian elders were to do.

Did the Ephesian elders have obligations that were similar to Paul's?³ Even though Paul was an apostle and they were not, these verses should be read that way.⁴ It is as if Paul said to them, "I have done these three things (20:25–27); now you similarly watch over yourselves as well as God's flock (20:28)." And since it was important for the Ephesian elders to declare the whole counsel of God, it is important for elders to do that today.

The meaning of "the whole counsel of God." What is the meaning of Paul's phrase "the whole counsel of God"? The Greek word used in this verse is *boulē*.⁵ To comprehend Paul's meaning, we have to understand what he is saying and in what specific context. Therefore, we need to look at how Paul and Luke, the author of Acts, use the word *boulē* in their writings.

First of all, some scholars, based upon Paul's statement in Acts 20:20,⁶ have claimed that the whole counsel of God is simply that which is profitable or helpful to God's people.⁷ But while there is nothing wrong with this interpretation, it is insufficient. For Paul, in fact, all Scripture is profitable, as he says in 2 Timothy 3:16.⁸

3. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977). Bruce puts 20:25–27 together and does not see a break between Paul's work and that of the elders.

4. After a series of three indicatives (concerning himself and what he did), Paul followed with a plural imperative, addressing them with a command.

5. Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (Chattanooga: AMG, 1992), 346: "will, purpose, intention as the result of reflection; counsel, decree, aim or estimation." The United Bible Society's Greek-English lexicon gives the meanings "purpose, intention; plan, decision."

6. Acts 20:20, "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful [or profitable, NASB] to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house."

7. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 415, n. 55: "A comparison of 27 with 20 shows that to Paul 'the whole counsel of God' was the measure of what was truly 'profitable.'"

8. 2 Tim. 3:16, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable [*ōphelimos*] for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (NKJV).

Nevertheless, it is surprising that Paul does not use the word *boulē* very often. In 1 Corinthians 4:5, he speaks of the *boulas* (plural) of the heart. Here the word is best translated as “intent” or “counsels” (NKJV). Sometimes it also appears that the words *oikonomia* and *boulē* are used synonymously by Paul.⁹

Luke’s extensive use of *boulē* is instructive. He uses it to denote the divine plan concerning redemption, as in Luke 7:30, where he comments that the Pharisees “rejected the will of God for themselves” (NKJV). In Acts 2:23, Jesus is said to have been “delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God” (NKJV). Similarly, in Acts 4:28 we read that evil men gathered together against Jesus “to do whatever . . . [God’s] purpose determined before to be done” (NKJV).¹⁰

In conclusion, it seems to be too narrow to limit the content of “the whole counsel of God” to that which is “useful.” If that were the case, Paul could have used another word, as he did in Ephesians 4:29, referring to “what is helpful [*or* good, NKJV, *agathos*] for building others up according to their needs” (NIV). That word *agathos* would better fit the definition of “profitable.”

More frequently, Paul uses the Greek word *symppherō* to refer to what is profitable or helpful. In Acts 20:20, it is used as a participle meaning “profitable.” The word appears with the same meaning in Rom. 5:3; 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23; 2 Cor. 8:10; 12:1.

Certainly, Paul had more in mind when he said good-bye to the Ephesian elders. Those elders were to continue in all of Paul’s teaching.¹¹ When *boulē* is combined with the word *pas*, meaning “all” or “whole,” Paul’s message to them is clear.

The exegetical conclusion from Paul (through Luke) is that God has set forth a task before all of his pastors and elders. Those elders need to keep watch over themselves, and to give to God’s people the

9. There is a close relationship between what Paul says in Acts 20 and in Eph. 1. He addresses the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 and writes to them in Eph. 1:1 as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” Eph. 1:11 links “the whole *oikonomia* of God with His *boulē*” (Gottlob Schrenk in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, ed. Gerhard Kittel [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 636). Eph. 1:11 should be translated “according to the decision [*or* plan] of his will.”

10. The word also occurs in Acts 5:38 (“if this plan . . . is of men”), 13:36 (“David . . . served . . . by the will of God”), 20:27, and 27:42 (“And the soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners”) (all NKJV).

11. Schrenk in *TDNT*, 1:635: “The *boulē* fills the whole content of apostolic preaching.”

whole counsel of God. Paul demanded nothing more from them—and nothing less. It is with his words of exhortation ringing in our ears that the present work is called “the whole counsel of God.”

Paul’s admonition has been heard by church leaders for centuries. These three volumes fit in with the teaching and preaching of those who have gone before.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Reformation beginnings. *The Whole Counsel of God* finds firm historical roots in John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 edition. However, Calvin’s thought found further development throughout Europe. This Reformed tradition developed in Switzerland, moved to France, and journeyed north to the Netherlands. It also jumped across the waters into England and Scotland. The broader body of systematic writing and reflection in the Reformed tradition has also influenced this work.¹²

Two works, written a century after Calvin, have been particularly helpful. The first was written by the great English Puritan John Owen. He wrote *Biblical Theology* in 1661. The second text, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, was produced in 1685 and came from the pen of the outstanding Dutch theologian Herman Witsius.¹³ Yet over the last three hundred years, there has been much further development in this tradition.

Travel to America. More than two hundred years after Witsius, Geerhardus Vos—himself a Dutchman—wrote a text with the same title as Owen’s work, *Biblical Theology*. Vos, of old Princeton Seminary, followed the patterns previously utilized by his great predecessors Calvin, Owen, and Witsius. However, his volume was intention-

12. The Swiss Reformation in general, including the theologians of Zurich, Basel, and Berne, has been the object of my teaching and research since the spring of 1981.

13. In 1648, a debate broke out in the Netherlands over the organization of systematic theology. One side, led by Johannes Cocceius, argued for what would today be called “biblical theology” as an organizing structure. More traditional systematic theologians opposed this move. Herman Witsius hoped to find a middle way between the two extremes. For more information, see volume 3.

ally limited to what he termed “the history of special revelation,” and therefore did not have the scope of previous works.¹⁴

Seventy years have passed since the publication of Vos’s *Biblical Theology* and his equally important companion volume, *The Pauline Eschatology*.¹⁵ Since that time, much work has been done to advance Vos’s insights.

The Whole Counsel of God is written to continue discussions of the relationship between exegesis and hermeneutics, and the interrelationships of biblical, systematic, and historical theology. *The Whole Counsel of God* will attempt to meet the need for a comprehensive theology that is attuned to the methodological advantages of biblical theology, but will also combine that advantage with the strengths of historical and systematic theology.

The first volume will focus on God’s self-revelation in the Old Testament (without being able to stay only within those confines!). The second volume will examine the New Testament’s teaching. The concluding volume will track the church’s theological development in its understanding and explication of the Bible’s teaching through the centuries.

14. See Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (1948; typeset, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), v.

15. These are not Vos’s only works. Among others, he authored *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus*, *The Kingdom of God and the Church*, *The Eschatology of the Old Testament*, and a collection of sermons entitled *Grace and Glory*. For more works of Vos, see James T. Dennison Jr., “The Writings of Geerhardus Vos: A Bibliography,” in *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 87–112.

Introduction to *God's Mighty Acts* *in the Old Testament*

VOLUME 1 RECOUNTS God's mighty acts as recorded in the Old Testament. Its aim is to develop the theology of the Old Testament within the framework of the organic, progressive, historical development of the Bible. At times, a topical method will be used, but the topics will be couched in their historical framework.

The volume is divided into five parts. The first part discusses foundational methodological questions. The second part moves to the unfolding of God's creation and his subsequent destruction of it in the Flood. The third part covers God's great deeds from the time of Abraham to the time of the writing prophets. The fourth part opens up the prophetic era. The concluding part briefly examines Israel's response to God's great deeds and looks at his apparent silence during the intertestamental period.

The author has many words of thanks to give for help over the years. Fruitful discussions of the proper method of teaching theology took place with colleagues Harvie Conn, Cornelius Van Til, Ray Dillard, and Bob Knudsen at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, all of whom now enjoy learning at the foot of the Master. I appreciate continuing discussions with former colleagues from Westminster and from Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando. Colleagues at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh have encouraged my work and provided an atmosphere of pious learning, without which this task could not have been accomplished.

Thanks must also be given to previous teaching assistants. Special mention is deserved by Jacob Hale, Burk Parsons, Dan Keene, Zack Kail, and Staci Wadkins. Other friends who have read parts of the manuscript and made valuable suggestions include the Rev. Douglas B.

Clawson, Dr. Scott McCullough, and Rev. Rutledge Etheridge. Any final mistakes are my responsibility.

Thanks go to the session and people of Second Reformed Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, who provided innumerable aids over the years. Special thanks is given to God for the College Hill Reformed Presbyterian Church, where I now have the pleasure of serving.

Janice, my wife of over three decades, has endured much while living with me during the writing of this work. For her love and affection I am deeply grateful. Over the years my gratitude to her has only deepened. Daughters Lindsey, Whitney, Hilary, and Gwenyth have also been great supporters. Lindsey read the manuscript and eliminated many errors. Former teaching assistant Zack Kail married Liesl, and the Lord blessed them with granddaughter Portia. May God bless and strengthen you all!

My hope is that this work will honor the contributions made to my life by former colleagues and teachers who fought the good fight and have entered into their reward, and that it will encourage a new generation of believers as well.

Soli Deo gloria!

≈ PART 1 ≈

Magnalia Dei,
“God’s Great Deeds”



The Nature and Method of Theology

DEFINING THEOLOGY

Developing a definition. This volume is founded upon, and is intended to examine and to elaborate, what Paul calls “the whole counsel of God.”¹ We have already looked at the context of Paul’s statement in the book of Acts concerning the whole counsel. The next step is to define theology in a general fashion.

A simple, yet accurate definition of theology would be “knowledge concerning God.”² That definition affirms many truths. It acknowledges that there is a God and that God can be known. It also recognizes that human beings are able to know things, even things about God. However, is it legitimate to make these assumptions concerning both God and humanity?

If theology is defined as “knowledge concerning God,” we are assuming that God exists and that he has revealed himself to humanity. Therefore, a more precise definition of theology would be something like “the study of God to the extent that he has revealed himself to humanity.” From this foundational definition, we can begin to develop the study of theology.

The Bible and creation: a subject-object problem. The last phrase in the definition, “to the extent that he has revealed himself to humanity,”

1. See Acts 20:27.

2. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (1948; reset, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 4.

presents a problem. That problem is what philosophers call "the subject-object problem."

We know that God has revealed himself to humanity in his creation and in his Word. When one turns to the creation account found in the first three chapters of the book of Genesis, one immediately notices that theology is quite different from any other area of human investigation or research. Theology is different because God has not only revealed himself to humanity, but actually created humanity.

To understand the first part of the definition, "the study of God," we have to understand what it is for a person to "study" something. Usually, to study something means to break the object down into component parts, to analyze them separately, and then to put them back together and understand them as a whole.

Such study implies that there are different parts to human knowledge. Starting at the very beginning, for any human learning to occur, there must be a "thinking subject" (a human investigator) and an object of investigation. For example, Adam and Eve (human thinking subjects), while in the Garden, could have investigated a tree. They could have examined the tree from every angle, taken off pieces of the bark and tasted them, and collected leaves from different trees for comparative studies. Adam could have pushed on the tree to see if it would fall over, and could have compared the strength of this particular tree with others.

Today, the method of human examination of a tree (an object) would be similar. One difference, however, would be that we have more advanced investigative tools. Today, photographs could be taken of the tree. Perhaps the tree could be sawed down to count and study its growth rings. So that we would not miss any part of the analysis, the tree could be microscopically probed, and it could be dug up to investigate its root structure.

Obviously, the study of God is not like the study of a tree! Theology as a discipline is unique. The normal subject-object relationship in a human investigation is not present, for God is not like a tree. God, as the Creator, cannot be tasted or pushed or examined. People and all things in the created world are distinct from God. This distinction appears to be absolute. In theology, unlike other human sciences, the

relationship between the subject (humanity) and the object (God) can even be reversed!

Furthermore, in theology the supposed object of investigation (God) is far from being passive like the tree. God is in fact the first one who is active on the field, by the work of creation itself. Man (the subject) was created and defined by God (the object)! To make the situation more complicated, the book of Genesis tells us that the subject (humanity) could have no knowledge of the object (God), were it not for the fact that the object (God) has graciously granted us access to knowledge of himself.³ Thus, theology is different in many ways from other areas of human study.

Human sin: a philosophical limiting concept. The human study of God becomes more complex with the introduction of a limiting concept, namely, sin. The fact of human sin is introduced in the Genesis creation narrative. The presence of sin in the world forces a further refinement of our definition of theology. Sin produced a new subject-object relationship. The human subjects (Adam and Eve), because of their rebellion against God, no longer trusted him (the object). That is why they hid from him immediately after their sin. Also, because of sin, the object of investigation (God) is in a different relationship with the subjects.

In the New Testament, Paul comments on this situation in Romans 1:18. After the Fall, he explains, human beings retain some knowledge of God. However, because of their sin, people now need a supernatural revelation or a new self-disclosure from God about himself. This supernatural revelation is required for humans (the subject) to understand any absolutely true and adequate information about divine things (the object). Yet even more is required.

The subject changed through regeneration. Besides the new revelation, there is need for a new relationship. The object (God) is “angry” with the subject, and the subject distrusts this Great Object. To create a new relationship, God has to be the active party. He

3. Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980). 4–5.

alone has the ability to change the estrangement. That change comes through conversion.

When human regeneration comes by the gracious act of God, a new type of individual or "knowing subject" is created.⁴ Now, through examination of the deposit of truth found in Scripture, the regenerated mind (subject) can obtain vast degrees of previously unknown knowledge concerning God (object). This does not mean that there has been a transformation in God's divine acts, words, or being; rather, the subject (humanity) has been changed.

A better preliminary definition of theology. An understanding of the subject-object problem facilitates the formulation of a better definition. Theology may be more precisely defined as "the appropriation by the regenerated mind of that supernatural/natural information by which God has made himself the object of human knowledge." This definition also needs to be understood in its various parts. The regenerated human mind needs to understand God's supernatural communication. This information is found in God's holy Word.

KNOWING GOD THROUGH THE BIBLE

The formation of the Scriptures. The development of theology necessitates interaction with Scripture. Theology, therefore, presupposes exegesis, which is the examination or interpretation of the Bible. However, preliminary to understanding exegesis or exegetical theology is the study of the formation of the Scriptures.

The field of study dealing with the formation of the Scriptures is generally termed canonics. Canonics is concerned with the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts of the Bible, the dates of those texts, and the human authors of them.⁵ It also deals with the development and communication of the actual written revelation itself.

4. Eph. 2:10, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works."

5. For more information on canonics, see Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956). See also R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957). Particularly good is Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "The New Testament as Canon," in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutics*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988). See also Roger Nicole, "The Canon of the New Testament,"

By the term *canon* or *canonical writing* is meant a divinely inspired book. All books of Scripture are inspired by God, and are therefore “canonical.”⁶ The Bible, as a whole book and in all of its parts, is divine and therefore canonical.

However, since Adam’s fall, humanity has distrusted God. People have been so corrupted by their own sin and rebellion that they are unable to recognize the divinity of the Bible. It is evident that humanity cannot recognize such divinity on its own; therefore, God must tell his readers that his book has proceeded from him. God himself has identified these canonical books for humanity.

The divinity of the Scriptures. While God himself may have so identified the Bible, that does not mean that it is easy for humans, who distrust him, to know that God has identified these books as divine. While the issues are multifaceted (more complex analysis follows in the second part of this volume), nevertheless men and women can know that the Bible is God’s word. Primary evidence for the divinity of any book of the Bible is provided by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit concerning it. This inward testimony is a conviction that is planted in the mind and heart of a believer by the Holy Spirit. The conviction is that these written words are “alive” with God’s power.⁷

There are also secondary evidences that corroborate the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit concerning the Bible. Those secondary evidences include the beautiful character of the contents, the harmony of all the various parts, the incomparable excellencies of the Bible

Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 40 (1997): 199–206. Nicole reminds his readers that “the authority of the Hebrew canon was clearly established by the practice of Jesus and the apostles” (p. 200).

6. Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 31: “By the term ‘canonical writings’ is meant those writings which constitute the inspired rule of faith and life. Canonical books, in other words, are those books which are regarded as divinely inspired. The criterion of a book’s canonicity, therefore, is its inspiration. If a book has been inspired of God, it is canonical, whether accepted by men as such or not. It is God and not man who determines whether a book is to belong to the Canon. Therefore, if a certain writing has indeed been the product of divine inspiration, it belongs in the Canon from the moment of its composition.”

7. *Ibid.*, 32: “The believer possesses a conviction that the Scriptures are God’s word, and that this conviction is a conviction which has been implanted in the mind by the Third Person of the Trinity. This conviction has been the possession of God’s people ever since the first portion of Scripture was committed to writing. There can be no doubt that the true Israel immediately recognized God’s revelation.”

itself, and the positive testimony of so many devout men and women over the ages.⁸ Granting that God has communicated supernatural information (the Bible) concerning himself to us, it would be helpful next to analyze the best methods to study that golden depository.

Biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. The examination of Scripture is usually called exegesis, and exegesis and exegetical theology are based upon insights from canonics. From canonics, the Bible student knows when a particular book of the Bible was written, the place where it was written, the human author of the material, and the first audience. Based on that historical work, he uses the "historical-grammatical" method of analyzing the biblical text. That is, he investigates the grammar of the original text, translates it into his own language, and studies its meaning within its literary-cultural context.⁹

When exegesis is combined with the Bible interpreter's own worldview, his presuppositions concerning the whole body of Scripture, this process develops into what is termed hermeneutics.¹⁰ A proper hermeneutic will always acknowledge God as the revealer of himself and as the ultimate author of the Scriptures. Thus, the tools that the regenerated person will use to understand God's self-revelation are exegesis and hermeneutics. Using those tools, we see that the Bible speaks of its own supernatural characteristics. It would be helpful now to investigate those characteristics.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SCRIPTURAL REVELATION

The doctrine of Scripture will be developed more completely later from actual analysis of biblical texts. Nevertheless, there are basic questions that should be addressed in a general introduction to the Scriptures and

8. Ibid., 33.

9. For further literature on exegesis, see Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1988), 27–37.

10. For more information on hermeneutics, see J. I. Packer, "Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics and Inerrancy," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 141–53. See also George W. Knight III, "The Scriptures Were Written for Our Instruction," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 (1996): 3–13. Richard L. Pratt Jr., in *He Gave Us Stories* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990), defines *hermeneutics* as simply "the study of all that goes into interpreting the Bible" (p. 1).

theology. Nonbelievers are not certain that the Bible is God's word. They are not certain that God, even if he existed, would be able or willing to communicate a divine word to humanity. If the Bible is the word of God, they ask, is all of it God's word, even those parts that appear to them to be contradictory?¹¹ An answer to this question must be given by anyone who hopes to present the whole counsel of God. The answer begins with recognizing a difference between the Bible and all other literature.

The Bible is not just a human book. In my freshman year at a liberal "Christian" college, our professor confronted the class. It was his job, he thought, to help his immature students to think about the Bible as "literature." Of course, there is nothing wrong with analyzing the Bible as literature. That is what we do when we consider a book's "genre," for example. However, the professor was convinced that the Bible was merely a piece of literature, just like any other piece of literature. To use his words, it was no different from Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*.¹²

At this point, the learned professor went too far. Those who view the Bible as only a human book are surely incorrect.¹³ The Bible is indeed a human book, but it is also the very word of the God of truth.¹⁴

11. Years ago, William Henry Green stated the question this way, and the same questions need to be answered by each generation: "The burning question of the age is not, what does the Bible teach? It is one yet more radical and fundamental: what is the Bible? In what sense is it the word of God? Is it a revelation from him, and divinely authoritative; or is it to be left to the interpreter to say what in it is from God and worthy of our faith, and what is the fallible human element that may be rejected? This question is approached from all sides, and the most diverse and conflicting answers have been given" (*Moses and the Prophets* [New York: Carter, 1883]).

12. Already in the eighteenth century, J. A. Ernesti claimed that "the Scriptures are to be investigated by the same rules as other books" (cited by Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*, 8).

13. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 26–27: "[Such a view] regards the Bible as a book of only human origin, whereas, as a matter of fact, the Bible is basically a book of divine origin." "There are those who apparently think that it is possible to approach the Bible with a neutral attitude. Their position seems to be, let us study Scripture as we would any other book. Let us subject it to the same tests as we do other writings. If it proves to be the word of God, well and good, but, if not, let us accept the fact. Essentially, this position is no different from the first two. The so-called neutral attitude towards the Bible is really not neutral at all, for it begins by rejecting the lofty claims of divinity which the Bible makes and it assumes that the human mind of itself can act as a judge of divine revelation."

14. Young, in *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 27, eloquently states: "The viewpoint adopted in this present work is that the Old Testament is the very Word of the God of truth. It is also the work of men. . . . In His inscrutable wisdom God chose and prepared for the task of writing those human agents whom He desired to speak His will. Then in mysterious fashion His

Revelation is historically progressive. Scriptural revelation is grounded in history and is structured in a historically progressive fashion.¹⁵ Later biblical books follow from, and are grounded upon, the earlier books. The regenerated person must know that the truths of Scripture come to him or her in the form of historically growing truth. The Bible is God's truth, and each Old Testament book has both a historical past and a future. In that sense, none of the Old Testament books has a "static" truth.

Therefore, since the Bible is not just a human book, but is supernatural information given in a historically progressive fashion, it would be helpful to see some of the Bible's claims concerning itself.

Scripture's claims concerning itself. God's Word makes certain claims within itself concerning itself. It claims that all human beings need a divine word from God for salvation. It is, from the human angle, necessary. Scripture also claims to be an authoritative word from God.¹⁶ Therefore, from our vantage point, the Bible is both necessary and authoritative. That being so, one might assume that all people who read this word from God would treat it as a great treasure.

However, we know that because of sin, non-Christians do not and will not accept the claims that the Bible makes concerning itself. The normal human response to God's gift, sadly, is to reject it. The unregenerate do not acknowledge their desperate need for the Word of God and reject its claim to authority.¹⁷

Spirit wrought upon them, so that what they wrote, although in a very true sense their own, was nevertheless precisely what the Spirit of God desired. The Bible, therefore, in one sense may be regarded as a human book. Basically, however, it is divine, and God Himself is its Author."

15. Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 15, 17: "This revelation was not given at one time, nor in the form of a theological dictionary. It was given progressively, for the process of revelation accompanies the process of redemption. . . . The most fruitful understanding of biblical theology is that which recognizes both the historical and progressive character of revelation and the unity of the divine counsel which it declares."

16. Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 15: "As self explanatory, God naturally speaks with absolute authority. It is Christ as God who speaks in the Bible. Therefore, the Bible does not appeal to human reason as ultimate in order to justify what it says. It comes to the human being with absolute authority."

17. *Ibid.*, 57: "From the non-Christian point of view, the idea of biblical authority is impossible."

The reasons for this negative response to God's own claims are diverse. Two of the reactions are sometimes called the irrationalist and the rationalist responses. The irrationalist person responds to God's claims armed with an assumption that "pure chance" guides all of reality. There can be no God in control of the universe. On the other hand, the rationalist responds with an assumption that reality is governed not by a personal God, but by impersonal laws—laws that he fully understands (and thus in some sense controls) in his mind.¹⁸ However, not all humans reject God's gracious revelation. The reasons why the regenerate embrace this information are also found in Scripture. This involves the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, but there is more that moves the believer.

The redemptive process. There is a connection between God's revelation in Scripture and other divine acts in history. This unified system of revelation and historical act could be called "the redemptive process." To understand the redemptive process, we must first appreciate that biblical revelation is not an isolated act of God, having no connection with all the other divine acts in history. We must not separate scriptural revelation from this comprehensive historical background of the total redemptive work of God. If we make that separation, then we fail to appreciate Scripture's historic and progressive character. The stages of this redemptive process need to be better understood.

The stages of the process. God's redemptive process has at least two stages: an "objective" stage and a "subjective" stage. A supernatural element is present in both.

The objective stage of redemption consists of the biblical events themselves. In other words, it is an objective fact that Israel was liberated from bondage at a certain time and place. Any event mentioned in Scripture is part of the objective stage of God's revelation. This stage of God's revelation is not subjective and individual in its nature; rather, it objectively addresses all of humanity. However, God applies these objective events (facts) to individuals. With that application, they become subjective.

18. *Ibid.*, 56.

The objective fact that Israel was liberated from slavery in Egypt, for example, or that Christ was raised from the dead, becomes something different from the objective fact that at one time John F. Kennedy, president of the United States, was assassinated. Each of the three events is a historical fact. However, the events recorded in the Bible are of the most profound and important character. No other facts of history are applicable to all of humanity, in all cultures, for all time. When the facts of the Bible (and especially the fact of Christ's resurrection) grip the heart of an individual, the objective fact of special revelation gains a subjective meaning. Thus, the objective and subjective stages of God's special revelation are clearly seen within the process of his work in human history.¹⁹

Among the thousands of biblical facts, some must be singled out as special. Some carry with them a heightened meaning. There is no disputing the fact that the redemptive work of God carries with it a heightened interest from the human perspective.

Redemptive acts. God has accomplished wonderful redemptive acts that reveal important principles of truth. Some of the greatest supernatural deeds were Israel's liberation from bondage in Egypt and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These events themselves form a part of God's special revelation. These miraculous "interferences" by God in history are themselves revelatory, and often furnish the joints and ligaments by which the whole framework of sacred history is held together and its structure is determined.

Truly redemptive acts, since they are recorded in a book, have a verbal aspect and never consist only of acts by themselves. Redemptive acts never take place apart from God's verbal communication of truth. God's word (the text) and God's act (the event) always accompany each other and are never contradictory.²⁰

A similar situation may be found in the Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both of these sacraments are mean-

19. Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology," 8.

20. The words that describe the event take hermeneutical priority over the event itself. Also, the words of the Bible do not "become" the word of God by the event of God speaking to the heart concerning that word. That latter view would be termed "Barthian," and will be described in more detail in volume 3.

ingful when a physical act (applying water or eating bread and wine) is accompanied by a mental understanding of its significance. And that sacramental significance (the mental understanding) can only be communicated by using words.²¹

There is therefore an intimate relationship between the text or words of the Bible, the mental images that form in the mind of the regenerated reader, and the subjective appropriation of that text in the believer's heart. While this may appear to be a complicated correlation, the Scriptures speak clearly to the nature of this relationship. This relationship is "contemporary."

Special revelation's practical or contemporary character. Biblical revelation may be said to be practical or contemporary in its nature. By "practical," we mean that from Genesis to Revelation, the knowledge given by God about himself is intended to enter into the actual life of humanity. It is to be worked out by people in all of its practical bearings and implications.

For example, God's creation ordinances (his commands to Adam) made life meaningful for Adam. The commands were very practical (God taught about rest, about eating, and about procreation), as well as "contemporary" to their precise situation in the Garden. After the Fall, God taught his people how to live as his people (instituting proper worship and government), how to live in his world with those who were not his people (e.g., giving laws concerning the foreigner and stranger), and how to live wisely (e.g., giving the Wisdom Literature). Thus, God's special revelation spoke to, and continues to speak to, God's people in a fashion that they could and can understand. Special revelation is presented in a manner that is valuable to all aspects of human life.

21. The relationship between God's redemptive acts in time and space and his written word must be understood. Events that are recorded in Scripture can be considered to be revelatory. For example, the event, the fact, of Christ's resurrection from the dead is clearly revelatory. Yet those events are recorded in the sacred text. Thus, the interpretation or meaning of the event can never be separated from the written word. Unfortunately, John H. Sailhamer, in his *Introduction to Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 68, demonstrates a fundamental confusion on this subject. He says, "For Vos, special revelation may go far beyond the scope of the text of Scripture. The category of *salvation history*, which he had apparently inherited from earlier theologians, allowed him to see revelation in events quite apart from the text. At the same time his deep roots in Protestant orthodoxy kept him from severing completely his ties to the biblical text as revelation." Sailhamer is mistaken in his analysis of Vos here.

God's revelation may be practical, but that does not mean that it is simple. Actually, there is a complex epistemological aspect to it. That is, the nature of God's special revelation itself is integral to human knowing. One part of that epistemological aspect is commonly called God's "accommodation" in special revelation.

Accommodation. God's revelation to humanity in the Old Testament was connected to the geographical, historical, and social conceptions of the nation of Israel. It was adjusted by him to Israel's capacity for knowledge at that time. Biblical revelation occurred in history and was given in a way that was comprehensible to its original audience. God's revelation was also couched in a way that was comprehensible to the scientific perceptions of the audience at that time and place.

Stated differently, God spoke to his people in a way that they could understand. Thus, when God spoke on "scientific" matters in the Old Testament, he did not assume that the Israelites knew the laws of thermodynamics, the theory of relativity, or even that the earth revolves around the sun. He gave to them information and laws that were applicable to their time, while still true for all time, and he did not include information and laws that would have made no sense to people living thousands of years ago.

For example, there are no laws in the Bible specifically about speeding tickets. There were at the time no cars or police. Laws about automobiles would have made no sense. Thus, the theologian must always understand the time-sensitive and language-sensitive nature of God's special revelation. God spoke a word that was comprehensible to his original audience, and yet a word that retains its full meaning and relevance for us today.

The notion of God accommodating his special revelation to the capacities of his people has long been appreciated by theologians. Such an accommodation simply makes sense. As preachers today speak in a way that is adjusted to the language and intellectual abilities of their congregations, so in a similar manner God spoke to his people. He spoke in language and in forms that were comprehensible to his audience then and now.²²

22. More will be found on the subject of accommodation, especially Calvin's use of the notion, in volume 3.

The fact that God accommodated his revelation indicates something of his nature. He wants men and women to know him. In knowing him, we learn to love and understand him better. Thus, as he accommodated himself to human capacity, God sometimes used common human relationships and objects to communicate truth that could transcend the normal meanings of those relationships. This means of communication, similar to the use of parables, was one of the favorites of Jesus, who used it over and over in his ministry. One of the means or tools that God used to communicate in a special way is called a covenant.

Covenant. God's supernatural revelation, in its form and content, has what is often called a covenantal character. This means that God enters into specific relationships with his people—relationships based upon promises given by God and accepted by his people.

God gave the first special revelation to Adam while he was in the Garden. God and Adam were in an intimate interpersonal relationship. The terms of that relationship were spelled out in what could be called a covenant. After the Fall, as God continued to reveal himself in human history, he often did so in the context of a covenant. This was particularly the case with God's special revelation to Noah (found in Gen. 9) and to Abraham (found in Gen. 12).

Thus, God's revelation was accommodated—presented in a way that was clear and comprehensible. Yet, there is more to learn about the epistemological aspects of special revelation.

Semitic or biblical epistemology. Epistemology is the study of how humans know something. For the Greek thinker, the knowing process was an entirely intellectual or rational procedure. In contrast, the Semitic (or Old Testament) view of epistemology is more practical.

To help us understand this concept, let us consider Deuteronomy 6:4, where God's ancient people were taught, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." This part of God's self-revelation includes intellectual apprehension of propositions. These words or propositions would at least include the fact that the true God was in a relationship with them (that is the significance of the word *LORD*), and that there was only one such God. But to "hear" this teaching properly, the Israelites had to consciously reject the idols (gods) around them

and "remember" that they were in a covenant relationship. Knowing these truths carried responsibilities for both their outward behavior (we could say their "hands") and their heart attitude.

In the New Testament, Jesus teaches the same type of epistemology with more clarity. He says in Matthew 22:37, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." To "know" God, as Jesus is telling his hearers here, is to love God.

We can now understand something more of God's solution to the subject-object problem discussed earlier. For the human subject to have knowledge of God, in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, a special type of knowledge has to be taught. This knowledge is more than an intellectual perceiving—it is a consciousness of the reality, as well as an apprehension of the properties, of the object of that knowing, interwoven within the subject's life. For the believer, it is knowledge obtained through the closest intercourse and communion with God attainable.²³

Scripturally speaking, a valid claim of knowledge of God presupposes the integration of that knowledge into the life of the knower, to the extent that the knower is not merely cognizant of facts, but actually changed in thought, volition, and action by those facts.

From this introduction to the nature of Scripture and the nature of the believer's relationship with God, we can move toward a more complete understanding of the nature and method of theology. Based upon these biblical principles, biblical theology provides a good avenue to take us there.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: ANALYSIS OF SPECIAL REVELATION IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTINUITY AND MULTIFORMITY

The historic-organic nature of special revelation. The word *organic* often brings to mind certain fruits and vegetables. Think-

23. Ralph L. Smith, *Old Testament Theology: Its History, Method, and Message* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 73–74: "In the Hebraic sense of 'the knowledge of God,' theology does not refer to an objective science of divine things, but it does use the critical faculties of the mind. It proceeds from both an inner commitment to faith and a participation in the destiny of a people." See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 479–80, who presents in excellent fashion many of the issues regarding the nature of human knowledge.

ing along agricultural lines, the kind of seed that farmers plant is very important to them. It is only out of a perfect seed that a perfect stem, then flower, and finally fruit, is produced. This agricultural image is analogous to what we observe in the Scriptures. From the beginning to the climax of Scripture, revealed truth is kept, like a perfect seed, in close contact with the soil of the wants and needs (and sometimes even the emergencies) of that living generation in which it has been planted.

The historically progressive nature of the Scriptures tells us that “the gospel of Paradise” that was revealed to Adam and Eve was one such beautiful seed, in which “the gospel of Paul” was present in potential form. Likewise, we can speak of “the gospel” of Abraham, of Moses, of David, of Isaiah, and of Jeremiah as expansions of this original message of salvation. Each presentation, each unfolding, points forward to the next stage of historical growth and development, and therefore brings the gospel one step closer to its full flowering in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

This notion of progressive revelation is inherent in the Old Testament itself, for later writers depend upon and expand the work of earlier ones. The prophet Zechariah refers to the “earlier” prophets.²⁴ Haggai indirectly refers to Jeremiah’s prophecy of what God will do with Zerubbabel.²⁵ Jeremiah looks back to the old covenants and forward to a new covenant.²⁶ Isaiah looks back to the old exodus and forward to another.²⁷ Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel look back at King David and forward to a new King.²⁸

The New Testament writers use the Old Testament in the same manner that the Old Testament writers use God’s earlier inspired writings. To exclude Old Testament references and allusions from the books of the New Testament, with the possible exception of Philemon, would be to gut their contents. On the other hand, without the New Testament, the Old would be incomplete. That is one reason why we say that Christ is the goal of the Old Testament.

24. Zech. 1:4; 7:7, 12.

25. Hag. 2:23 with reference to Jer. 22:24–25.

26. Jer. 31:31–34.

27. Isa. 43:14–21; 48:20; 52:12.

28. Jer. 23:5–6; Ezek. 34:23–24; 37:24–27.

Christ is the goal of the Old Testament. The eventual coming of Jesus the Messiah was the goal of the Old Testament. That Christ was the goal of the Old Testament is demonstrated in the divine institutions themselves. As Old Testament special revelation progressed historically, God established the office of the priest, who functioned culturally to draw the people of God into his presence. He also gave his people prophets, who spoke God's word and labored to protect the theocracy. God established the theocracy itself and the Davidic kingship that went with it. These institutions—the priestly, the prophetic, and the theocratic (kingship)—all helped the people of God to see the necessity and nature of the coming Messiah.

Old Testament revelation was, in a sense, a prelude to his arrival. This is most dramatically portrayed in Malachi's statements concerning the coming of the Messiah. The great Messiah's future coming would be heralded by the work of the great "prophet Elijah."²⁹

To express the idea in other words, the Old Testament has a thematic Christological center, yet all of the events themselves are still both factual and meaningful. Old Testament special revelation is itself meaningful. These two notions, the Christological center and meaningfulness within its own historic context, must control Old Testament exegesis. While it is not fully developed, the Old Testament is still the word of God!

Therefore, the theologian must be very careful in handling the Hebrew Bible, and not try to make it say more than it should bear, given its place in God's history.³⁰ To understand what could be called a "forced" interpretation of the Old Testament, that is, inserting later teaching into earlier, turn for an example to the creation account. At creation, God said, "Let us make man in our image." Should this particular passage, where God said "Let us," be taken as a proof text for the doctrine of the Trinity? Because of later revelation, we know that God is in fact triune. Yet the best exegesis of this passage will not force it to go beyond the meaning anchored in its own historical context, a context that was controlled

29. Mal. 4:5–6.

30. It is hoped that this analysis will aid the Bible student in confronting and answering the penetrating questions posed by Peter Enns at the beginning of his review of books by Paul R. House and Walter Brueggemann in *Westminster Theological Journal* 64 (2002): 202.

by God. The important notion of historical context leads us to consider the epochs of revelation.

The epochs of revelation. There were various epochs or periods of God's special revelation. There were times of what could be termed "quickenings" of special revelation, that is, when God gave his revelation within concentrated historical eras. These quickenings often centered around particular individuals, such as the patriarch Abraham, the lawgiver Moses, King David, and Jesus Christ. These historical epochs, like special revelation itself, were progressive in character. The latter receive content from the former and expand the former.

Related to the idea of epochs of special revelation is the notion of connections between present and future epochs or worlds. God's method of self-revelation has been to create within the living organism or life of the past and present world yet another world. This other world centers upon a future redemption. These two spheres or worlds always coexist: the "secular" (past and present) world or sphere, and the "divine" (future) world or sphere. Neither of the two can exist (at this point in human history) independently of the other, and each draws benefits from the other. Returning to agricultural imagery, it is as if God's supernatural revelation (divine history, focusing upon redemption) was a seed planted in the gardener's prepared soil (secular history, or the present world), and in that soil the divine word grew and flourished.

Literary distinctions in Scripture. Within these various revelatory epochs, within redemptive history itself, there are also clear literary distinctions among the biblical texts. These literary distinctions are generally termed "genres." In the Old Testament, there are what scholars term legal genres, prophetic genres, historical narrative genres, and wisdom and poetic genres.

In the New Testament, besides the genres observed in the Old Testament, there is the gospel genre. The Gospels are different in character from the Epistles, and both are differentiated from what is known as the genre of apocalypse (the book of Revelation). As a general rule, differentiation in biblical genre increases over time.

In Scripture, the character, the personalities, and even the sociological and historical backgrounds of the various human authors are not hidden, and that relates to genre. For example, Moses, who was raised in the house of Pharaoh, was a very different type of person, and lived in a historically different world, from Luke the physician. Because they were different persons, living at different times and writing in different languages, it is not surprising to observe differences in their writing styles, even though both wrote under divine inspiration.

The scope of the distinctions among the biblical authors is perhaps most beautifully perceived in the writings of the apostle Paul. God's truth itself can be presented in different ways. Some means of communication are at times more effective than others. Since God is perfect, his special revelation is also perfect. Thus, whatever information he chooses to reveal will be expressed in the perfect form for that information. Especially in Paul's writings, the theologian can readily observe different ways in which God's truth is presented. Sometimes Paul communicated God's truth by means of logic or rhetorical structures. At other times, he was more simply didactic. And at still other times, Paul was quite capable of being intensely emotive or doxological.³¹

God intended to give full expression to all of the various ways in which his beautiful truth could be presented. He thus chose men like Moses and Paul from their mother's wombs, molded their characters and their life experiences, and gave to them such training that the truth revealed through them necessarily bore the impress of God's own mind. There was no collision of thought or purpose here between a sovereign God and humanity, because the human author's character and time frame, as well as his gifts and his training, were all subsumed under a comprehensive divine plan.

Furthermore, these differences of literary genre, of human character and author, were important even when biblical authors were writing at about the same time. For example, although the gospel of John was written at roughly the same time as the Synoptic Gospels, it is in a sense a fuller and wider self-revelation of Christ because of the author's gifts and character. It is simply because God meant it to be so.³²

31. More on Paul's writings and theology will be found in volume 2.

32. If John was written quite a bit later than the Synoptics, as many scholars believe, then it would be easy to attribute the differences in the Johannine corpus to the added years of theo-

Biblical theology.³³ The discipline of biblical theology developed from the foundation of the organic-historic nature of Scripture, holding that Christ is Scripture's ultimate goal, that there are epochs of special revelation, and that Scripture was written by men who used different literary genres.³⁴ In other words, biblical theology is exegesis that is founded upon the organic, historic development of the Bible. Furthermore, it is the study of the form and content of supernatural revelation in its historical unfolding, with the events of the historical unfolding considered as parts and products of a divine work. In biblical theology, the historical background and circumstances of the text are valued as an element of God's revealing activity. "Biblical theology," said the discipline's founder, Geerhardus Vos, "is the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity."³⁵

Stated differently, when believers exegete the Bible in its historical and organic continuity, they are doing biblical theology. Biblical theology gives the exegete tremendous information concerning God, and thus about theology. Vos "made redemptive revelatory acts of God his central concern," says Richard Pratt. "He focused on the form and content of divine revelation unique to each era." Furthermore, Vos "affirmed that redemptive history was the Bible's 'own revelatory structure' and the 'main stem of revelation.'"³⁶ Biblical theology is therefore more than a simple narrative of his-

logical reflection. The complex issues of dating and literary dependence between the gospel of John and the Synoptics are relegated to another section. For more information on those issues, see volume 2.

33. A short bibliography on biblical theology can be found in Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 122–24. A helpful article on biblical theology is James T. Dennison, "What Is Biblical Theology? Reflections on the Inaugural Address of Geerhardus Vos," *Kerux* 2/1 (1987): 33–41.

34. O. Palmer Robertson, "The Outlook for Biblical Theology," in *Toward a Theology for the Future*, ed. David F. Wells and Clark H. Pinnock (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1971), 65–91; James A. Walther, "The Significance of Methodology for Biblical Theology," *Perspective* 10 (1969): 217–33.

35. Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology," 6–11. See Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 5. Born in 1862, Vos came to the United States in 1881 and studied at Calvin Theological Seminary and then Princeton Theological Seminary. He received his doctorate from the University of Strassburg in 1888. Turning down Kuyper's offer to teach at the new Free University in Amsterdam, he chose to begin his career at Calvin Theological Seminary, where he taught for five years. He then moved to Princeton, where he stayed until retirement.

36. Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*, 80.

torical events. It is the tracing of God's finger through the history of revelation.³⁷

Conclusion: defining theology. Given the previous analysis, it is now possible to present a formal definition of theology. Theology is "the appropriation by the regenerated mind of that supernatural/natural information by which God has made himself the object of human knowledge."

This acquisition of knowledge about God by the regenerated mind necessarily transforms the student. The first and most important duty of every theologian is to let the image of God's self-revelation in the Scriptures reflect itself as fully and as clearly as possible in his or her own mind and life.

Also, if Pratt is right in arguing that biblical theology is the Bible's own "revelatory structure," then there should be no opposition between biblical theology and systematic theology.³⁸ To determine if that is in fact the case, the next chapter will investigate how theology should be structured.

37. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 17: "It is not precisely even a history of revelation, for its theological concern carries it beyond any merely historical study of the course of revelation." "Abraham Kuyper prefers to speak of *historia revelationis* rather than biblical theology, but he would include in dogmatic theology the tracing of the development of each doctrine through the history of revelation" (p. 17, n. 18).

38. *Ibid.*, 15: "Biblical theology formulates the character and content of the progress of revelation in these periods, observing the expanding horizons from age to age."