



*An Introduction to the Biblical  
Theology of Acts and Paul*

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TIME

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RICHARD B.  
GAFFIN JR.

*Foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson*

“I count myself blessed to be among generations of seminary students who have ‘basked’ in the glory of Christ as we sat under Richard Gaffin’s instruction, hearing him unfold the rich theology of Acts and the Pauline epistles. Gaffin models careful attention to, and insightful exposition of, specific New Testament texts as he places each passage within the context of the fulfillment of redemptive work and history in Christ’s person. I thank God that this rich lecture material is now offered in print form to the people of God.”

**Dennis E. Johnson**, Professor Emeritus of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California; author, *Him We Proclaim*; *Walking with Jesus through His Word*; and *Journeys with Jesus*

“Few living theologians have shaped my own understanding of the deep structures of New Testament theology more than Richard Gaffin. And now in one volume we have the core of his contribution to our generation. He connects the dots for us to see how the apostles understood us New Testament believers to be those ‘on whom the end of the ages has come’ (1 Cor. 10:11). It is especially in understanding the macro-significance to Paul’s thinking of the resurrection—that of Christ’s, and thereby of those united to him—that Gaffin takes twenty-first-century students, pastors, and other readers back into the minds of the apostles with profound clarity. I bless God for giving us this magnificent volume through his faithful servant, Richard Gaffin.”

**Dane Ortlund**, Senior Pastor, Naperville Presbyterian Church; author, *Gentle and Lowly* and *Deeper*

“Sadly, Richard Gaffin’s work is a well-kept secret. Well, not entirely. It is known in certain circles, particularly in a portion of the Reformed community, but because of the profundity of his considerations, these labors ought to be known throughout the Christian world and beyond. *In the Fullness of Time* represents the lifework of this seasoned scholar. Like a master craftsman, Gaffin carefully places stone upon stone, which yields a lovely, finished edifice. Comparing the book of Acts to the theology of the apostle Paul is not a project that is immediately evident. After reading this book, it will have become quite patent. The centrality of Pentecost to Paul’s understanding of the Holy Spirit—an emphasis that so characterizes all his work—herein becomes manifest. More than that, it becomes vital for the life of the church. Striking are both the depth and the originality of this analysis. This work is destined to be not only the standard but a pacesetter for decades to come.”

**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life*

“This is the much-anticipated fruit from the author’s many decades as a professor of both New Testament and systematic theology. A noble successor of the work of Geerhardus Vos, Richard Gaffin has helped many of us to understand how the Bible should be read. Plus, this volume expounds the climactic events of redemptive history. Read, mark, learn, and digest this work.”

**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“Year after year in the classroom, Richard Gaffin radically influenced countless students and would-be pastors in their reading and preaching of Scripture. Those lectures, now happily in print for all to see, if read until absorbed, will change the reader’s understanding of Scripture in remarkable and likely surprising ways. No pastor or biblical scholar should neglect the slow digestion of this rich biblical diet. Its truths have been shown to be truly revolutionary.”

**K. Scott Oliphint**, Dean of Faculty and Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Some books provide less than their title promises. This one provides more. While it does serve as ‘an introduction,’ it is not an elementary survey. It rather deftly combines careful exegesis, interaction with scholarship, an integrated view of the whole of Scripture, and awareness of the church’s place and mission in the world today. The compelling result, often drawing on the underrated Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos, is a doctrinally rich exploration and synthesis of how Acts and Paul’s letters depict Christ’s saving work, in time and for all eternity.”

**Robert W. Yarbrough**, Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

“If in a Qumran-like cave the discovery were to be made of the risen Lord’s lecture notes for his forty-day session imparted to his apostles concerning the kingdom of God, they would greatly mirror the truths, themes, and organic union of the Old Testament and the New Testament gospel so perceptively articulated by Richard Gaffin found herein. *In the Fullness of Time* is indeed ‘an introduction to the biblical theology of Acts and Paul,’ but it is far more. It is the magisterial crescendo of a lifetime of scholarly study, unpacking the realized eschatology of the historical-redemptive revelation of Jesus Christ and his epoch-making grant of the Holy Spirit to his church. This masterpiece of biblical theology will open the word, shape your mind, and bless your heart. No serious student of Holy Scripture should miss the joy of being led by Gaffin and his compelling exegesis into a deeper and fuller understanding of the believer’s union with the risen Christ.”

**Peter Lillback**, President and Professor of Historical Theology and Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary

“The first thought that comes to my mind about Richard Gaffin is that he is a reliable interpreter of Scripture. *In the Fullness of Time* thoroughly demonstrates this point. It balances what Christ accomplished at his cross and resurrection in the first century and how that relates to believers now in their own Christian experience. In particular, Gaffin shows how important Christ’s death and resurrection are for the Christian’s suffering in the present. While many past commentators have focused on the importance of Christ’s *death* in Paul’s theology, Gaffin explains how important Christ’s *resurrection* is, especially for Christian living. Those who read Gaffin’s book are in for a ‘theological treat.’”

**G. K. Beale**, Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary

*In the Fullness of Time*



# In the Fullness of Time

*An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul*

Richard B. Gaffin Jr.

Foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson

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# Foreword

IN 1965, NED B. STONEHOUSE, Professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, introduced his Scottish colleague John Murray's commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans* by writing of his "gratification" with it. More than that, he added,

If indeed full expression were to be given to my estimate of the volume, my sense of elation might easily result in the use of superlatives. A measure of restraint must be observed, however, considering especially my intimate relationships with the author over a period of thirty-five years. These associations . . . have led to an enthusiastic appraisal of the author as exegete as we all as warm affection for him personally.<sup>1</sup>

Now more than half a century later, it is the turn of a Scotsman to pay the compliment to Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor in turn of New Testament and then of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Westminster. I do so with no less pleasure but perhaps feel less restraint than Professor Stonehouse in expressing the undiluted joy it is to see these pages in print.

*In the Fullness of Time* is a truly wonderful book. It gives so much, and yet—as should be, since its author handles sacred Scripture with faith as well as intellectual rigor and insight—it will leave you feeling, even after four hundred pages, that Dr. Gaffin has only begun, and that there is yet more to discover. It is not because Professor Gaffin has sold you short, but because you feel you are in the presence of one who has mined more deeply and found more precious stones than can possibly be deposited in

1 John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), vii.



one book. I suspect many readers will feel as they turn these pages that they are gathering sparkling exegetical and theological jewels in both hands and will be encouraged to continue their studies.

A hallmark of *In the Fullness of Time* is its penetration into the deep structures of Paul's thought. There are many pages here where I suspect readers will want to slow down, perhaps reread, meditate, and, best of all, worship. For Dr. Gaffin (to resort to the earlier metaphor) is like a skilled diamond merchant who lends you his loupe and teaches you how to look through it and to admire the multifaceted beauty of the diamond that Paul calls "my gospel."

To change the metaphor, readers will discover that the table of contents provides a map to the theological ascent on which Dick Gaffin is the expert guide. The book itself is like the running commentary of an experienced climber who points out the structures of the mountain and the wonders of the scenery, and occasionally indicates danger points where some climbers have slipped. And in the ascent we are given glimpses of other aspects of the mountain that remain to be climbed on another occasion. Always the ascent is directed toward giving us a memorable view of God's work of salvation wrought in Jesus Christ and applied by the Holy Spirit.

No doubt, such pleasure in reading is partly to be attributed to personal knowledge of the author. It certainly adds to a reading experience to be able to "hear" the writer's accent, to recognize the familiar idiosyncrasies of speech patterns, and on one's mental screen see the familiar facial expressions and gesticulations. And in the case of *In the Fullness of Time*, this is all enhanced by the profound esteem and admiration in which—with a multitude of others—I hold Dick Gaffin as a scholar, a teacher, a friend, and, most of all, like Paul, as "a man in Christ."

But, thankfully, elements of this experience are available to all readers. For, as Dr. Gaffin indicates, he has resisted editing out evidence of the origin of his material in the classroom lectures on Acts and Paul heard by generations of students at Westminster Seminary. For them, part of the enjoyment of these chapters will be the ability to remember having this rich exposition of Paul poured into them *viva voce*. But for those of us who have not had that privilege, hearing the echoes of those class hours as we read *In the Fullness of Time* is surely the next best thing to "being there."

What readers will also sense as they read these pages is that they express the vital, living faith of their author. Mining the apostle Paul's letters has

never been for Dick Gaffin a mere intellectual exercise. This teaching has been his lifeblood, as I suspect every student who sat before him in class soon came to realize.

From early years as Dr. Gaffin's junior colleague, I privately coined a verb—used only in the passive—to describe the effect of his teaching on the Westminster student body (I am not sure I ever confessed this secret to him!). To be “Gaffinized” means to come under the influence of Dr. Gaffin's gracious teaching in such a way that it—and he—left a lifelong impress on your understanding of the gospel and its deep structures. It was not difficult to detect this process of “Gaffinization.” And it seemed a happy coincidence to me that the Hebrew word for vine, *גפן* (*gephen*), sounds almost indistinguishable from the author's name—for he has truly been the bearer of rich fruit in his family, his colleagues, his students, his denomination, his many friends, and all his ministry. He has humbly embodied the theology he teaches us here and exemplified the life-desire of Paul himself to

gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own . . . but that which comes through faith in Christ . . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:8–11)

In my mind's eye, I see generations of Dr. Gaffin's students who, instead of taking their newly acquired copy of *In the Fullness of Time* into the study, will carefully place it on the coffee table in full but (out of respect for its author!) not overly obtrusive view. The goal will be that their children or grandchildren may see it, and ask, “Who is Richard B. Gaffin?” As a reward, they will be told tales from the class known as “NT 223” and learn how, for almost half a century, “Acts and Paul” was virtually a single word universally associated with Dr. Gaffin himself.

For these reasons, it is a very great privilege and joy to act as the mouthpiece of a multitude of seminary graduates who are profoundly grateful that *In the Fullness of Time* will give many more people access to the teaching they have gratefully received from their mentor, friend, and example, Richard B. Gaffin Jr.

Sinclair B. Ferguson



# Preface

THIS BOOK IS THE EFFORT to put in writing the content of class lectures for a course on the book of Acts and the letters of Paul offered annually at Westminster Theological Seminary from 1977 to 2010 (with much of the section on Paul given in 2015). My thanks to Crossway for providing transcriptions of the audio files for a particular (2005) offering of the course, which together with my lecture notes have almost entirely shaped the book's contents as well as fixed its limits.

Within the New Testament curriculum, the course was sequenced with two other required courses, taught by others, preceded by one on the Gospels and followed by the other on the General Epistles and Revelation. This meant that, at points, I had to presuppose or anticipate, as I do in this volume, conclusions on matters dealt with fully in these and other courses.

As I began teaching the course and continued developing it, the large challenge facing me was how best to use the approximately fifty (fifty-minute) sessions of the course. There is obviously not one right answer to this question. Approaches other than mine that are sound and helpful can be taken, and I can well imagine that some, especially among them those who have taught a similar course or courses, will wonder about or second-guess my approach at a number of points. Why did I not take up this or that topic? Why have I given so much attention to one area, or why not more to another?

This book, then, reflecting as it does the purpose and the time constraints of the course, does not provide a full or rounded-out presentation of the theologies of Acts and Paul. Instead, like the course, its concern is with primary matters, things "of first importance" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3), in dealing with these theologies.

In that regard, the decision to focus on the significance of Pentecost for the theology of Acts and on eschatological structure, including the resurrection, for the theology of Paul is surely in order and difficult to gainsay. In chapters 13 and 14, from among a number of worthwhile topics on the Christian life, I have singled out the indicative-imperative relationship and suffering for, as it appears to me, their particular timeliness.

In keeping with the structure and flow of the course, I have aimed as well to maintain the classroom level of its content—one large exception being that the lecturing was done from using Scripture in the original languages, which I have kept to a minimum here.

Given this classroom-level aim, I do not see myself as writing for my academic peers, although I hope that some among them may have an interest in my presentation of material. The readers I primarily have in mind are those with some prior familiarity with Acts and Paul's letters, looking for an initial "deep dive," as it were, into their teaching.

Apart from occasional references throughout, I have not sought to provide the complete footnoting and documentation that might otherwise be expected. I want, then, to be clear in acknowledging my considerable dependence on the work of many others, especially Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos. Over the years, I have seen myself as involved, in large part, in transmitting and building on their insights into the wonderful riches of God's word, and I am deeply grateful to have had that opportunity. Whatever the value of this book depends on how successfully I have done that.

A further word about sources is in order. As noted in the first paragraph above, this book is largely based on class lectures. Some of that lecture material has also appeared in previously published works, including "Redemption and Resurrection: An Exercise in Biblical-Systematic Theology," in *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times*, ed. Michael S. Horton (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 229–49; *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, 2nd edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013); "The Resurrection of Christ and Salvation," The Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>; "The Resurrection of the Christ and the Age to Come," The Gospel Coalition; and "Union with Christ," The Gospel Coalition. I have noted throughout where there is a substantial overlap with these previous publications but also want readers to be aware that they are not sources for this book. The class lectures are the primary source for both those previous publications and this book.

Also in order are acknowledgments, with thanks, of my indebtedness to others: to Jared Oliphint, who initiated the idea for the book with Crossway; to Dennis Johnson, Westminster Seminary California, for reading the manuscript and making helpful suggestions; and, at Crossway, to Justin Taylor for his ongoing encouragement and to Kevin Emmert for his careful editing and numerous helpful proposals for improvements.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention my deep appreciation for the able and devoted students of over three decades whose questions in the classroom, whose answers on examinations, and who in frequent informal discussions often served to sharpen my own thinking and presentation of material.

R. Gaffin Jr.  
November 2021



# Introduction

SEVERAL MATTERS, supplementary in nature, serve the interpretation of Acts and the letters of Paul.

In addressing them here, some at greater length than others, I do so on the assumption that you, the reader, already have some familiarity with these documents. This prior exposure undoubtedly varies widely from person to person, but most, perhaps all, will have at least some knowledge of them, however minimal.

On this assumption, my interest in this volume may be seen as a *deepening* interest—to grow in understanding Acts and the letters of Paul and to develop in the ability to interpret them soundly. At the same time, this deepened concern ought always to serve a more ultimate concern—that we believe and obey them as the written word of God.

This deepening concern involves challenges, at times difficult and even presently unresolvable problems. Yet the two concerns are not in tension but thoroughly compatible. Whatever problems we inevitably encounter in understanding Scripture, they do not, and never will, diminish its pervasive and abiding clarity and the need for uninhibited submission to its final authority.

## INTERPRETATION AND PROCLAMATION

With that said and without at all meaning to eclipse the ultimate concern just indicated—obedience to God’s word—I should make clear that the material in this volume should be seen as coming from a lectern, not a pulpit, as belonging in a classroom or study, not a chapel. In other words, I will not be occupied primarily with directly applying to our lives the truth of Acts and Paul’s letters.



This, however, hardly means to divorce lectern and pulpit or, in other terms, to drive a wedge between the *interpretation* of Scripture and its *proclamation*. In fact, given that Scripture is the subject matter of both, the line between the two cannot be a sharp one. But that line is a legitimate and necessary one. The difference in view here and its validity and importance may be seen in a number of ways. Here I point that out briefly in terms of the distinction between *historical distance* and *contemporary relevance*.

For interpretation, the distance between the then-and-there of the text in its historical origin and embeddedness, and the here-and-now of the interpreter is *explicit*; its contemporary relevance is *implicit*. For preaching and other ways of ministering the text to and beyond the congregation today, the situation is the reverse: contemporary relevance is explicit, historical distance mostly implicit.

For both—interpretation and proclamation—immediate relevance, whether implicit or explicit, is always guaranteed because the text is God’s word and so remains the necessary and sufficient final authority for faith and life for every generation, regardless of time and place, until history ends at Christ’s return. This is why the line between interpretation and proclamation, as drawn here, is not a hard-and-fast one, why too our interpretive approach, for reasons that will become ever clearer as we proceed, will inevitably yield results clearly applicable today and personally edifying to my readers.

Interpretation, then, is in order to proclamation; sound preaching presupposes and flows from solid exposition. Negatively, exposition that does not have in view, at least implicitly, what serves the life and witness of the congregation is skewed. On the other hand, preaching devoid of exposition is a travesty. The interpreter primarily serves the preacher; the preacher himself, in turn, must have some competence as an interpreter and as a judge of the interpretation of others. In the spirit (if not the letter) of the apostle (see 2 Thess. 3:10), “If anyone is not willing to exegete, let him neither preach nor teach.”

## HELPS FOR INTERPRETATION

A variety of topics facilitate an in-depth understanding of Acts and Paul. Here, I do little more than remind readers of some of the major areas.

For one, there is the mix of questions usually designated “special introduction.” These deal with matters like authorship, date and place of origin, destination and original recipients, language and style. In the case, say, of

Romans: Who was and what do we know about its author? When, where, and under what circumstances did he write it? Who were the original recipients, where were they located, and what were their circumstances? Such questions appropriately come up for every New Testament document, including all those we will be considering. To be considered additionally for the letters of Paul is the question of their relative chronology. For instance, which was written first, 1 Corinthians or 1 Timothy? Galatians or Romans?

Related to issues of special introduction more broadly is the area of backgrounds. Our concern is with documents whose origin is within the first-century Greco-Roman Mediterranean world. What is the makeup of that environment? What factors—cultural, linguistic, social, political, and so on—constitute it?

In this regard, a particularly important area, one that has become of heightened interest in more recent study of the New Testament, especially Paul, is the Judaism of the time—Jewish life and theology in its various manifestations during the Second Temple period. What about the community at Qumran? Or rabbinic Judaism? Or the distinctions between Palestinian Judaism, the Judaism of the land, and the Judaism of the Diaspora (Hellenistic Judaism)? Attention to such questions serves our basic objective of deepening our understanding of Acts and Paul.

Another important area is the history of the interpretation of Acts and Paul. The interpretation of Scripture—particularly as we are engaged with it as the word of God—ought to be intensely personal. But it is not an individualistic enterprise. We have to be on guard against what may be dubbed the “me and my Bible syndrome,” doing my own thing with the Scriptures, more or less in a personal vacuum.

Probably very few, if any, will defend that approach. But among those who would not, many, I suspect, nonetheless fall into something like it, in unreflecting practice if not in theory—a bane arguably of much use of the Bible in contemporary evangelicalism. We can guard against that tendency by remaining aware that a very broad context for our own work is the *church*, which with all that regrettably continues to divide within it nonetheless remains ultimately one in Christ and so is basically unified across the ages and in every place.

The lofty prayer of the apostle at the end of Ephesians 3, we may fairly say, has in view something like a deepened understanding of the knowledge

of God in Christ we are concerned for in this book—in its “breadth and length and height and depth” and “to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” An integral aspect of that prayer, not to be missed, is that this deepened comprehension be together “with all the saints” (3:18–19).

“With all the saints” evokes, in the best sense of the word, the ecumenical character of sound biblical interpretation. We are not the first persons or generation to interpret Acts and Paul; we ought not to lose sight of our solidarity with the great host of those who have gone before us and whose work surrounds us. Certainly we should not absolutize any interpreter or interpretive tradition. We expect that we will not always agree, but we also expect to learn, and to learn a great deal, from others. Negatively, in those often-quoted words, variously attributed, “Those who ignore the mistakes of the past are bound to repeat them.” That truth, too, surely documents itself as we look at church history and the history of interpretation.

#### INTERPRETATION PROPER

The topics that I have just been noting, and others that could be mentioned, are important, as they contribute to a careful, methodologically self-aware study of Acts and Paul; they should not be neglected. Without much reflection, however, you can recognize that none of them involves dealing with Acts and Paul’s letters in terms of what we could characterize as their intended meaning and function, or the structure of their teaching. Or to qualify that statement a bit, all these areas, like special introduction and background studies, involve us, at the most, only indirectly or incidentally in getting at the intended meaning and function of the text.<sup>1</sup>

A brief, simple example serves to make this point. Especially since the time of the Enlightenment, one of the big issues in the academic study of Paul has been the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles. Who wrote them continues to be a matter of ongoing debate with extensively developed arguments and counterarguments, particularly as so-called historical-critical scholarship in large part denies their Pauline authorship.<sup>2</sup> My point here?

- 1 We need to respect that intention. Reader response techniques have their place, but they must never function, particularly in the case of interpreting Scripture, to override what I am referring to here as the intended meaning of the text.
- 2 For our purposes here, in its essentials, the historical-critical method applied to the Bible is not simply a matter of being committed to careful, methodical, and methodologically self-aware interpretation of the text; no one ought to object to that. Rather, as its most consistent

For Paul, the authorship of the Pastorals was hardly an uncertain issue or one that greatly preoccupied him!

Topics like background studies and special introduction, in other words, are just that, *introductory*. They are no more than auxiliary in relation to the subject matter of the text. They are helpful to interpretation, but they are not interpretation in the focused or most proper sense. The issues addressed are certainly legitimate and useful, but they are not what is most important in studying Scripture: its intended meaning, what it teaches. This, then, “interpretation proper” of Acts and Paul, is my focus in this volume. I will not deal with introductory matters as such; pertinent conclusions will either be presupposed or noted in passing.<sup>3</sup>

What this focus also means in general terms, then, is that my interest is in these writings for their revelatory character and function, as they are part of the revelation of the triune God that has its climactic focus in the person and work of Christ. We will be occupied with them as, in a single word that captures the essence of their content all told, they are *gospel*, and therefore as—a description applicable to all of them—they are “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

To transpose this into a more explicitly methodological key, our interpretative approach will be *redemptive-historical* or *biblical-theological*. Both these expressions, more or less interchangeable as I use them, have a broad and widely varying currency today, particularly “biblical theology.” So, some account of what in my view constitutes redemptive-historical method or a biblical-theological approach is in order at this point. First, I offer some

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practitioners make clear, “critical” means a commitment to the autonomy of reason such that (1) the interpreter has not only the right but also the obligation to stand in judgment over the text, either to validate or, failing that, to call into question or even reject the truth claims of its content (so-called *Sachkritik*); (2) the biblical documents, as written texts, have a purely human origin and authorship, and so are to be treated like any other historical text, with at least the presumption and even the expectation of the presence of errors, whether factual or moral.

Of many works that could be cited, two by its advocates have especially shaped my own understanding: Gerhard Ebeling, “The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism,” in *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1963), 17–61; and Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1966); on the requisite autonomy of the interpreter, see esp. chaps. 1–3.

<sup>3</sup> For a full treatment of introductory matters see, e.g., D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). A briefer discussion, older but still especially useful, is J. Gresham Machen, *The New Testament. An Introduction to Its Literature and History* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 51–188.

overall comments about biblical theology and then, more specifically but still in general terms, about New Testament (biblical) theology.

## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY<sup>4</sup>

### Basic Elements

The following factors, subject to some important qualifications made later, bear on and serve to define a biblical-theological or redemptive-historical approach:

First, revelation, in the sense of verbal communication from God, whether spoken or written, has come as a *historical process*, with an emphasis on both “historical” and “process.” As the record of this historical process, Scripture—God-breathed in its entirety (2 Tim. 3:16) and so itself fully revelatory—is an integral part of this process, the history of special revelation.<sup>5</sup>

The extent of this history, all that was actually revealed, is larger than the contents of Scripture, as John 20:30 and 21:25 show. At the same time, Scripture expects us to believe that the “pattern found in Scripture reflects the pattern followed in the history of revelation as a whole.”<sup>6</sup> The biblical contours are the actual revelation-historical contours. Scripture provides us with a trustworthy revelatory guide to the entire universe of special revelation; there are no revelatory galaxies out there of which we know nothing.

A contrast serves to highlight this factor of historical process. In their divinely authored origin, the biblical documents have not been dropped, as it were, *senkrecht von oben*—straight down from heaven—contrary to the widespread evangelical tendency in practice noted above.

Also, it is worth noting, in this respect the Bible is unlike the scriptures of other major religions—for instance, the Koran, supposedly dictated to Mohammed through a series of night visions in a relatively short time span, certainly within his lifetime, or the Book of Mormon, claimed to be based on gold tablets unearthed in upper New York State, translated,

4 The literature is voluminous; for the view taken here, see esp. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), v–vi, 3–18.

5 Of course, special revelation always takes place within the context of the creation as revealing God (general or natural revelation). The question of the relationship between general and special revelation, important as it is, is beyond our purview here.

6 John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 4: Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 18.

and published within a short time. The positive significance of revelation coming as an unfolding history and the origin of Scripture as part of that history will be noted presently.

A second factor defining biblical theology, closely related to the first, is that revelation, understood as verbal, is *not an end in itself*. Revelation is never by itself in the sense of giving us information that consists in timeless truths about God, man, and the world.<sup>7</sup> As a fair and important generalization, verbal revelation is always occasioned by and focused on God's activity in history. God's revelatory word is oriented toward his action as Creator and Redeemer.

Further in this regard, revelation can be seen to focus on that action as it attests or, alternatively, interprets, as it either describes or explains. Of course, to describe is already to interpret. The two, description and interpretation, are on a continuum hermeneutically. The difference between them is not a hard-and-fast one, though this relative difference can usually be recognized.

Invariably, then—this is a primary point we are wanting to accent here—God's speech is related to his actions, his word to his work. In this sense—the focus of word on work—verbal revelation, as already stated above, is not an end in itself. Verbal revelation is *derivative*, a function of what God has done in history. Redemption is the *raison d'être* for revelation. "Revelation is so interwoven with redemption that unless allowed to consider the latter, it would be suspended in the air."<sup>8</sup>

In this focus of revelatory word on redemptive deed, of word revelation on deed revelation,<sup>9</sup> lies the deeper reason for our first point above—that revelation comes as a historical process. Verbal revelation is an essential concomitant within that historical process by which God the Creator is

7 "Timeless" in this statement is subject to misunderstanding. To be rejected is the notion that the validity of revealed truth is atemporal, independent of what takes place in time and impervious to what occurs in history. Not in question, however, is the abiding truthfulness and permanent relevance of biblical revelation. In that sense, Paul's teaching, say, on the role of women in the life of the church is "timeless."

8 Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 15.

9 This distinction between redemptive deed and revelatory word is also not a hard-and-fast one: verbal revelatory activity is redemptive, and nonverbal redemptive activity is revelatory; this integration or coalescence—of word and deed, of revelation and redemption—is realized consummately in Christ, his person and work, in both his actions and his teaching, as the Word of God (John 1:1; Heb. 1:2).

actually at work in history, accomplishing the redemption of his creation and the salvation of his people. Verbal revelation has its historically progressive character because it is derivative of the historically progressive character that characterizes redemption, the unfolding of the history of redemption.

In view globally, when we speak of redemptive history, is the history that begins in the garden following the fall and the resulting curse on human sin that affects the entire creation (Rom. 8:20-22), largely incorporating in its unfolding the history of Israel, and reaches its consummation in the work of Christ in “the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4), when “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

Verbal revelation, then, has come as an organic historical whole, as a completed organically unfolding historical process. Negatively, the Bible is not a compilation of disjointed oracles to isolated or unrelated individuals; it is not an anthology of revelatory vignettes more or less independent of each other.

In sum: when we hear the word *revelation*, the history of verbal revelation ought always to come to mind—the history that is an integral stream within the mainstream of the history of redemption and conforms to the contours of that larger flow.

In this sense, then, revelation interprets redemption and the focus of biblical theology is revelation as redemptive-historical.

### **Biblical Basis<sup>10</sup>**

To this point, my comments have been largely assertive. What about their biblical basis? That can be established in a number of ways. Here I focus on perhaps the clearest, most explicit warrant, found in the opening words of the epistle to the Hebrews:

God, having spoken formerly to the fathers by the prophets at many times and in various ways, has in these last days spoken to us in the Son.  
(1:1-2, my translation)

This statement is intended, umbrella-like, to cover what the writer goes on to say in the document as a whole. In doing that, it functions as well to

<sup>10</sup> See also Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 7-8.

provide an overarching outlook on God's speaking, on his self-revelation as a whole. Four interrelated factors are present in this statement.

First, revelation is plainly in view as a *historical process*.

Second, this historical process is marked by *diversity*; diversity shapes its unfolding. That diversity is highlighted by the two phrases "at many times" and "in various ways." Each of these phrases translates one of two Greek words, adverbs, accented by their placement together at the beginning of the statement in the Greek text. Close to each other in meaning, they likely differ in that the first (πολυμερῶς) indicates multiple parts or times, while the other (πολυτρόπως) different ways or modes.

Briefly here but importantly, the diversity indicated by these words includes various literary genres and so the need to give them due attention in interpreting Scripture. At the same time, it should be recognized that literary approaches and genre concerns have their validity only as they subserve understanding the actual historical occurrence that is the substance of redemption.

Third and climactic is the reference to the Son. Christ is in view both (1) as the endpoint or final goal of the history of revelation, and (2) with all the diversity involved, as he is its integrating focus (cf., e.g., 2 Cor. 1:20). There is no indication here or in what the writer goes on to say subsequently that there are trajectories in revelation leading up to the Son that bypass the consummating fulfillment that takes place in him (see outside Hebrews esp. Luke 24:44-47; cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).

This is true not simply in a relative or limited sense but absolutely, for the Son is said to be nothing less than God's "last days" speaking; the Son is the eschatological endpoint and fulfillment of that revelatory speech. God's revelation in his Son, in his incarnate person and work, both deed-revelation and word-revelation, has a finality that cannot be superseded or surpassed. Christ consummates as he closes the history of revelation.<sup>11</sup> As the hymn line asks rhetorically, "What more can he say than to you he has said?"<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For the writer of Hebrews, the salvation "declared at first by the Lord" includes its attestation "by those who heard" (Heb. 2:3). This attestation is plausibly understood as the ear (and eye) witness of the apostles, authorized by Christ himself (e.g., Acts 1:8; cf. 1:2, 20-21), such that their words are his words (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:37; 1 Thess. 2:13), and others associated with them in the foundational period of the church (cf. Eph. 2:20).

<sup>12</sup> "How Firm a Foundation" in *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia, PA: Great Commission, 1990), 94, stanza 1.



Fourth, the history of revelation involves human activity. This activity is not to be depreciated but given due consideration, for it is integral. It explains in large part the existence of the considerable diversity accented by the writer and contributes to the makeup of the history as a whole.

How the writer construes this human activity in general should not be missed. “God has spoken” is the nuclear assertion of Hebrews 1:1–2. He is the sole subject of both verbs for speaking (participle in 1:1 and main verb in 1:2); everything else is subordinate, not only syntactically but also semantically. The human activity in view—“through the prophets”<sup>13</sup>—is *instrumental*.

The way the writer introduces the same quotation from Psalm 95:7 (Ps. 94 in the LXX, Septuagint) illustrates how this instrumentality is to be understood: what God is “saying through David” (Heb. 4:7) is what “the Holy Spirit says” (3:7). The speaking of David and others (oral and written) is neither somehow independent of nor in tension with God’s speaking. Rather, God utilizes them so that their speaking is his; their words are to be received as his, entirely truthful and finally authoritative.<sup>14</sup>

### Some Basic Qualifications

The biblically supported comments made so far about redemptive-historical or biblical-theological method are subject to the following three necessary and important qualifications and clarifications.

First, it needs to be kept in mind that God is more than his revelation. The focus of the history of revelation is, as noted, on the activity of God as Creator and Redeemer, on who God is in what he does. But with that distinguishing focus, revelation also points us to recognize that the revealing God is more than his revelation, that he exists prior to that activity and is not defined exhaustively by it. As Creator and Redeemer, he is more than Creator and Redeemer, infinitely more. He is not dependent on his creation and what transpires in it or limited by it in any way. Nor is our knowledge of him exhausted by our knowledge of what he does in creation and redemption. Rather, in his aseity—his existing of himself (*a se*) and

13 This reference to the prophets is synecdochic for the human instrumentality employed throughout the entire history of revelation; cf. the parallel statements in 2:2 (angels) and 3:5 (Moses).

14 This pattern, for one, sanctions the distinction made subsequently in formulations of the doctrine of Scripture between God and the human writers, respectively, as primary author (*auctor primarius*) and secondary authors (*auctores secundarii*).

independent of creation—he transcends creation even as he is immanent and active within it.

Attention to the history of redemption will be sound only where this truth is not only not lost sight of but also adequately honored. Isaiah 57:15, for one, beautifully voices this ultimately incomprehensible reality: “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, / who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: / ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, / and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, / to revive the spirit of the lowly, / and to revive the heart of the contrite.’”

Second, verbal revelation is not only redemptive but also preredemptive. The Bible itself is a redemptive revelation in that all the documents date from after the fall. But in order that we properly understand its main theme of redemption, it provides an account of the original creation and its goodness (Gen. 1:31) and the subsequent historicity of the fall, and so the consequent need for redemption from sin and its effects.

That account attests prefall and therefore preredemptive verbal revelation. Specific instances, fairly read as *typical* of the fellowship between God and Adam and Eve before the fall, are Genesis 1:28–30, 2:16–17 (by implication, 2:19), and 3:1–3.<sup>15</sup> This fellowship bond, with the verbal revelation involved, can be shown to be the initial instance of the covenant making that centrally structures God’s relationship with humanity before as well as after the fall (covenant of works, covenant of grace). Accordingly, “covenant-historical,” covering both prefall and postfall verbal revelation, is a more comprehensive designation than “redemptive-historical.”

Third, the distinction needs to be kept clear between redemptive or salvation history (*historia salutis*), the once-for-all accomplishment of salvation, and the ongoing application of that salvation (*ordo salutis*, the order of salvation). The history of redemption, originating in the garden with the fall and moving forward from there toward its completion in the work of Christ, is distinct from its continuing appropriation, regardless of time and place after the fall.

The two are obviously connected. The latter (redemption applied) depends upon the former (redemption accomplished), while the former absent the latter is devoid of its intended efficacy. But neither may the difference between

15 See Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 22–23 (“Pre-Redemptive and Redemptive Special Revelation”).

them be obscured or blurred. When I speak throughout of the history of redemption or what is redemptive-historical, I have in mind the former, redemption accomplished (*historia salutis*), not its application (*ordo salutis*).

### **Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics**

From the preceding observations it can perhaps be appreciated that a primary significance of a biblical-theological approach is hermeneutical. This prompts some further comment on that significance and the relationship between biblical theology and exegesis.

*The Unity of Scripture.* Recognition of its unity is essential to a proper view of Scripture. That conviction, then, is integral to its sound interpretation.

That unity, to be clear, is doctrinal or didactic in nature, possessed by the Bible as a whole because God in his unimpeachable veracity is its primary author and as such accountable for every word. The unity of the Bible is a fundamental hermeneutical principle; we could even say its unity is a pre- or metahermeneutical principle. If you do not come to the careful study of the Bible on the supposition of its unity, then you may be able to say a lot, and a lot learned, about what the Bible says, but in the end you will ultimately misunderstand and distort Scripture, especially its central message of salvation in Christ. That does not put it too strongly.

In holding to the unity of Scripture, we speak of the analogy of Scripture (*analogia Scripturae*). “Analogy” functions here for the notion that to understand Scripture, Scripture is to be compared with Scripture; any portion of Scripture has its meaning in the context of the rest of Scripture. This principle has been given classical expression, for one, in the Westminster Confession of Faith: “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”<sup>16</sup>

This principle was grasped and articulated in the original generation of the Reformation. Its Scripture principle (*sola Scriptura*) involves a hermeneutical proposition, expressed by Luther’s *Scriptura interpres Scripturae*,

16 Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.9. For this and subsequent references to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, see, e.g., *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005); <https://opc.org/confessions.html>.

“Scripture the interpreter of Scripture.”<sup>17</sup> We need always to appreciate that, as much as anything, the Reformation is about how to interpret the Bible correctly; the Reformation is fairly seen as one large renewed hermeneutical undertaking.

As this principle has also been put, Scripture is self-interpreting or self-elucidating. This does not mean that the Bible may be interpreted in a vacuum, in isolation and without any attention to introductory or background issues like those noted earlier. But any given text (however factored, whatever its length) is located within the context of the unified teaching of Scripture as a whole and has its meaning elucidated as it is embedded within that overall unity and is clarified in the light of other passages. Any given text of Scripture is aptly visualized as the center of increasingly widening circles of context that, as they expand to include the whole of Scripture, have a bearing on understanding that text.

In considering the hermeneutical significance of a biblical-theological approach, then, it is important to see that the unity of Scripture is fundamentally a *redemptive-historical* or *covenant-historical* unity.

The unity of the Bible may be fairly viewed in different ways. For instance, in affirming that unity, particularly in light of the point made earlier about its doctrinal or didactic unity, we may speak of the unity of the Bible as consisting of a set of mutually consistent, noncontradictory assertions. To say that would be true but clearly does not go far enough when we consider Scripture’s *content*.

In speaking of the redemptive-historical unity of Scripture, in view is the unity that lies in back of the Scriptures. Predicating unity of the statements of Scripture in terms of its content recognizes the unity or coherence predicable of the organically unfolding historical process of redemption that Scripture documents. As unity marks the actual unfolding of the history of redemption, as that original revelation process is a unified process, so too the God-authored record of that historical process, itself part of that process, is unified. The unity of the Bible reflects and is an expression of the unity of the organism, the organic pattern, of God’s activity in history as Creator and Redeemer.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *Career of the Reformer III*, vol. 33 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1972), 25–26.

That entails, then, brought to bear more specifically on the actual work of exegesis, for interpreting a particular biblical text of whatever genre or length (from a single sentence to a larger discourse unit), essential is understanding its place in the history of revelation, its place within covenant history. In terms of the subject matter of the text—what the text is talking about—an all-controlling context is the redemptive- and revelational-historical context.

### **Terminology**

A brief comment on terminology is in order at this point. A certain liability attaches to the expression “biblical theology.” For one, it can leave the impression that other theological areas are seen as not or less than “biblical.” Also, it can be taken to suggest that in view is a particular theological discipline that can go its own way, as it were, that has its own terrain or turf in distinction from other areas of theological endeavor and can proceed more or less on its own, independent from the other theological disciplines, in particular, say, from systematic theology.

Such misconceptions are to be resisted, because, as I have just pointed out, what is centrally at issue in biblical theology are methodological considerations that involve every aspect of the theological enterprise, because in its entirety that endeavor is staked on sound exegesis. So-called biblical theology is about exegeting rightly, interpreting Scripture correctly.

Vos and others following him, even though they continue to speak of “biblical theology” because of its established currency, have proposed “history of special revelation” as a preferable designation, given its distinguishing concern to consider the original revelation-historical process as recorded in the Old and New Testaments. Further on the matter of terminology, preferable to the substantive “biblical theology” are the adjectives “biblical-theological” or “redemptive-historical” or “covenant-historical”; they better serve to indicate the primarily methodological or functional aspect involved.

### **Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology (Dogmatics)<sup>18</sup>**

The preceding comments bring into view the often-discussed question of the relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology.

<sup>18</sup> Of a considerable volume of literature that could be cited, cf. the helpful overview of Lee Irons, “Biblical and Systematic Theology: A Digest of Reformed Opinion on Their Proper Relationship,” *The Upper Register* (website), [http://www.upper-register.com/papers/bt\\_st.html](http://www.upper-register.com/papers/bt_st.html).

Suffice it here to say the following: Biblical theology is the *indispensable servant* of systematic theology, where the latter is understood as providing a presentation, under appropriate topics, of the teaching of the Bible as a whole.<sup>19</sup> Biblical theology is *indispensable* for systematic theology because its distinguishing attention to the text in its redemptive-historical context is indispensable for the exegesis that is the lifeblood of sound systematic theology.

Biblical theology is also systematic theology's *servant*. It is subordinate to systematic theology in the sense that its distinguishing focus on the specific and distinctive revelatory contributions of each of the various secondary, human authors of Scripture (and by others recorded in their writings) is not for its own sake but only as it serves the more ultimate end of presenting the unified and coherent teaching of the Bible in its entirety as the word of God, its primary author. For instance, our interest in Romans or in Paul's theology is not ultimately in what he says but what God says there and elsewhere in Scripture.

### Biblical Theology in Historical Perspective

It is worth noting that an *explicitly conceived* application of biblical-theological method or a redemptive-historical orientation is relatively recent, particularly within the tradition of Reformed and, more broadly, evangelical theology. That may be said to date largely, and as much as anyone, from the seminal work of Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949), the first occupant of the newly created chair of biblical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary (1893–1932). Vos is fairly seen as the father of Reformed biblical theology.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> I have discussed this relationship elsewhere over the years (see the source cited in n22 below for some other references). For another brief statement, see, e.g., Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Redemption and Resurrection: An Exercise in Biblical-Systematic Theology," in *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 229–30.

<sup>20</sup> The term "biblical theology" begins to occur and gain currency about a century earlier in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, largely within the context of the emerging historical-critical school of biblical interpretation. This biblical theology, which took hold increasingly in ways that proved to be highly influential, particularly in and through key theological faculties of German universities, was self-consciously predicated on a denial of the inspiration and canonicity of Scripture (as taught in Scripture), and so on a denial of the entire truthfulness and unity of its teaching. Over a century later, without our overlooking or depreciating precursors and the pertinent work of others contemporary to Vos, it is fair to say that he led the way in doing biblical theology based on biblically sound presuppositions and principles.

At the same time, however, in highlighting the significance of his work and the explicit biblical theology he developed, it is important not to overlook significant continuity with the past. It is not as if the church was stumbling around in interpretive darkness until suddenly at the end of the nineteenth century Vos and others appeared on the scene.

To enter briefly into what could become a long and profitable discussion, the church has always been sensitive to what is really at stake in so-called biblical theology. Why? Because the church has always been alert to the *historical character* of the salvation come in Christ. That concern—salvation as accomplished in history—as much as anything is the vital nerve of biblical theology.

From its earliest days, particularly in its conflict with gnosticism that raged over much of the second century and beyond,<sup>21</sup> the church has been aware that salvation and saving faith depend vitally not only on who God *is*, or on what he *says*, but ultimately and pointedly on what he *has done*, in history in Christ.

What the church has appreciated, whether implicitly or explicitly, from its beginning is that the knowledge of God, true *cognitio Dei*, is not simply information about God, about the nature of God or man or the world, but at its core is gospel knowledge, knowledge of what has taken place in history in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

So, seen already for instance in the account of Paul in Athens (Acts 17:16–32), the church has perceived that Christianity is not just another competing philosophy. The affront of Christianity is not that it offers another option (however “new” and “strange,” 17:19–20). Rather, it soon became evident that the gospel message Paul and others proclaimed, centered on the death and resurrection of Christ, would not simply fold nicely into classical pagan Greco-Roman culture but was destructive at its root of its idolatrous worldview.

The thesis of continuity with later biblical theology may be argued further by showing that, especially beginning with the Reformation, exegesis has often been implicitly biblical-theological.

With this continuity noted, at the same time Vos’s epoch-making labors and what he introduced into the life of the church should be recognized.

21 In fact, traces of this conflict go back into the New Testament itself, as seen, for instance, in the protognostic errors addressed in the Johannine correspondence (cf. 1 John 4:2) and dealt with by Paul in the church in Colossae.

He is the first, or the most gifted among the first, within historic Christian orthodoxy, certainly the first within the Reformed tradition, to give pointed and programmatic attention to revelation as an unfolding historical process, to grasp the fundamental significance of that fact and to draw out, though not as explicitly as could be wished, its methodological and hermeneutical consequences. The present situation continues to be one where with much profit still to be gained from the work of Vos and its implications, it has yet to have the influence it deserves.<sup>22</sup>

### Concluding Observations

The preceding reflections on biblical theology can be rounded out with a couple of concluding observations that serve to reinforce some of what has already been said.

First, by now it can be recognized that, as I view it, biblical-theological method is neither a dispensable exegetical luxury nor an esoteric handling of the text, yielding higher insights reserved for a select group of initiates. Such views, sometimes encountered, betray a serious undervaluing of biblical theology (the theological elitism of the latter is also unedifying). For its concern arises from the subject matter of Scripture itself and has in view methodological issues that are not only appropriate but essential to understanding the text.

In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul challenges Timothy to be a “worker” with “no need to be ashamed” in “rightly handling the word of truth.” *Orthodoxy* and *orthodox* derive from the prefix of the compound word used for this “right handling” (ὀρθοτομεῖν). So, we may say, here Paul expresses a concern for Timothy’s hermeneutics to be a correct hermeneutics. At stake in so-called biblical theology is nothing less than what is indispensable for this sound, “orthodox” handling of Scripture.

Second, what has been said so far about biblical-theological method may not have made sufficiently clear that what is in view is better described more loosely as an approach or an orientation rather than a method. Certainly we are not talking about some ironclad methodology, some rigid or stereotyped

<sup>22</sup> See further Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Vos, Geerhardus,” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 1016–19; Danny E. Olinger, *Geerhardus Vos: Reformed Biblical Theologian, Confessional Presbyterian* (Philadelphia, PA: Reformed Forum), 2018.



set of procedures. Nor is it as if we have in our possession the final word in interpreting Scripture. Rather, as said, in view is an approach to Scripture that recognizes and accommodates a variety of methodological levels and will incorporate various exegetical procedures and techniques.

In this regard with an eye to a misunderstanding that sometimes surfaces, it is not as if we have to choose between grammatical-historical exegesis and redemptive-historical interpretation. That betrays a false disjunction. A redemptive-historical orientation demands or, better, incorporates sound and careful grammatical-historical exegesis.

Looking in a related but somewhat different direction, a redemptive-historical approach readily recognizes the place for a multiplicity of perspectives in handling Scripture. In Ephesians 3:8, the apostle speaks of “the unsearchable riches of Christ,” and in 3:10 of “the manifold wisdom of God.” No approach, no handling of Scripture can come close to exhausting this multifaceted wisdom of God revealed in Christ with the fullness of perspectives it opens up. With that said, however, I would accent that the redemptive-historical “perspective,” with its controlling focus on Christ as central to the whole of Scripture, is not just one among others. It is, if you will, a megaperspective that embraces and accommodates all others.

## NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY<sup>23</sup>

The preceding comments concern biblical theology in general. Narrowing our focus now, what is involved specifically in a biblical-theological approach to the New Testament? How do we do justice to the New Testament in view of the historically progressive character of special revelation? What is entailed in interpreting the New Testament in terms of redemptive or covenant history?

### **The Endpoint of the Revelation Process**

First, of several observations prompted by these questions, the concern of the New Testament is not so much with the process of revelation as the *endpoint* of that process. In comparison, ongoing development in revelation is much more a structural characteristic of the Old Testament—a difference

23 This section builds on and supplements Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 299-304 (“The Structure of New Testament Revelation”).

seen simply by noting that the Old Testament documents appeared over the span of roughly a millennium, from Moses to the postexilic prophets. The New Testament, in contrast, is written in approximately one generation. A clear canonical distinction exists between process and endpoint.

Further, to anticipate briefly a major point of what our work in Acts and Paul's letters will show, when we consider the content of New Testament revelation—and that, of course, is preeminently Christ, his person and work—and even more specifically, when we consider the *eschatological* character of his work, then, as we look at the New Testament as a whole, we have reason for speaking of the eschatological character of New Testament revelation, and so of the New Testament as being concerned with the *eschatological endpoint* of the history of revelation. Here we need do no more than remind ourselves of Hebrews 1:2, noted above: God's new covenant speech in the Son occurs "in these last days"; it is his culminating eschatological speaking.

### Historical Progression

Taking note of this point, however, should not be at the expense of overlooking the presence of process and development within the New Testament. In fact, historical progression is a critical element there: globally, the movement from the ministry of John the Baptist to the earthly ministry of Jesus to the apostolic church.

In fact, this historical progression is not only present but basic to the gospel. At the heart of the gospel is the historical progression experienced by Christ himself. He moves, pivotally by the cross and resurrection, from his state of humiliation to his state of exaltation—from bearing the just wrath and curse of God that his people deserve for their sins to being restored irreversibly, with that wrath propitiated and removed, to God's favor. The result is the permanent *transition from wrath to grace in history*, effected for the salvation of his people. The gospel stands or falls with the historical sequence of Christ's humiliation and exaltation.<sup>24</sup>

There is, then, a basic, three-phase historical progression in New Testament revelation: John—Jesus—the church. As we look within each of

<sup>24</sup> This point needs to be affirmed and maintained particularly against views, stemming largely from the influence of the theology of Karl Barth, in which Christ's humiliation and exaltation in their significance for the gospel are seen not as a genuine historical before and after but instead are transposed into an ever-present, dialectically related above and below.

these phases, we may surely recognize that development took place and hypothesize how, more or less probably, it occurred. But such development is not made prominent in the New Testament records. For instance, in considering the church during the time the New Testament was being written, it becomes difficult to establish a precise, fully detailed construction of how its history unfolded—a state of affairs that keeps New Testament scholarship at work revisiting the issues involved. These issues are not unimportant, because they serve to enlighten. But they are not issues to which we are able to provide full and clear-cut answers because of the nature of New Testament revelation.

The controlling concern of the New Testament writers is different. The focus of their interest, “of first importance” for them, is Christ’s death and resurrection (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:3–4). They are intent on presenting this event-complex in its immediate and extended historical context and with its immediate and, as it has now turned out to be, long-term historical consequences. In doing that, they provide revelation sufficient for the time until the still-future return of Christ.

At the same time, their collective concern, with its focus on the cross and resurrection, also relates the entire New Testament to the Old Testament as a whole. They document and reinforce in different ways what has taken place in Christ, particularly his death and resurrection, as the fulfillment of Old Testament history. In doing that, it should not be missed, they also understand themselves to be showing the true meaning of Israel’s Scriptures—not a new meaning they give to those Scriptures but their inherent and only meaning.

Another factor to keep in mind related to development is that the entire New Testament is written after the cross and resurrection. Every New Testament document, including the Gospels, which deal largely with the period before the resurrection, is written from a post-resurrection outlook. Even the Gospels contain explicit elaboration or commentary from this exaltation perspective. This is particularly evident in John’s Gospel: his postresurrection vantage point comes out more explicitly in comparison to the Synoptics (e.g., John 2:21–22; 7:39).

Our observations to this point pertaining to New Testament (biblical) theology may be focused by the following generalization: the New Testament in its various parts, as a record of the consummation of the history of

redemption, provides a *variety of witness to Jesus Christ from a postresurrection perspective*. Or to put it in a somewhat more formalized way: the New Testament consists of *diverse and synchronic witness to the exalted Christ*.<sup>25</sup> The task for New Testament interpretation, as fruitful as it is challenging, is to carefully explore this New Testament witness in its full variety.

### The New Testament as Witness

This basic characterization of the New Testament prompts a couple of clarifying comments. The first concerns “witness” as a key category for describing the New Testament, the other about that witness as varied or diverse.

#### *Apostolic Witness*

There are some who are properly wary about categorizing Scripture as “witness.” That understandable hesitation has come about largely because of the way many apply that term to Scripture. Here, Karl Barth may again be singled out for the widespread and massive influence his doctrine of Scripture has had over the course of the twentieth century to the present, particularly in the academic study of theology.

In this view, dominant particularly in the historical-critical tradition to the virtual exclusion of all other views, “witness” functions to introduce discontinuity between revelation and the Bible, to drive a wedge between them. The use of the term carries the nuance of “only” or “no more than” a witness, with the further elaboration that this witness is purely human and that the Bible, merely human in its origin and character as a written text, is, as such, fallible.

My use of “witness” applied to the New Testament must be careful to distance itself from this view and to make clear how it differs. Due caution, however, should not be allowed to deprive us of the good and proper use of the term, in fact, its biblical use.

Here we do little more than to take note of some key conclusions that a more careful study of the use of the primary New Testament word group for “witness” (μαρτυρία, μάρτυρος, μαρτυρέω) will be able to establish.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> “Synchronic” in the sense that all of the New Testament documents are authored from the essentially same-time *redemptive-historical* vantage point.

<sup>26</sup> See Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 2nd rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1988), 58–68.

The witness that we find in the New Testament is more than just an individual's "personal testimony," as that expression is usually used today. Rather, the μαρτυρία encountered there is witness that is transsubjective, witness that is absolutely reliable and trustworthy, that is to be believed, that serves to establish the truth and compels assent; it is the kind of witness that will stand up in a court of law.

Applied to the Old Testament—for instance, the witness of Moses as the immediate context of John 5:39 makes clear (5:45–47)—“The Scriptures,” Jesus says to his opponents, “bear witness about me.” This witness-bearing of the Scriptures as it accuses them will serve as sufficient grounds to condemn them for rejecting Jesus.

The New Testament, largely considered, is apostolic witness. As such, it is the witness of Christ. The witness of the apostles is the witness the exalted Christ has appointed and authorized, such that he identifies it as his very own (Acts 1:21–22; Eph. 2:20); it is on par with Jesus's own words in truth and authority (e.g., 2 Cor. 13:3; 1 John 1:2 and 4:14 in the light of 1:2).<sup>27</sup>

Apostolic witness as the witness of Christ is, further, the witness of the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of truth,” and that specifically in relation to the witness of the apostles (John 15:26–27).<sup>28</sup> Witness in the New Testament, then, involves the correlate witness of the apostles, Christ, and the Holy Spirit as the same witness. There is a back-and-forth within this triad (Christ—the Spirit—the apostles); the witness of any one implies the witness of the others.

This is the kind of witness that marks the New Testament as a collection of writings (canon), in characterizing it as diverse witness to the exalted Christ—witness that is fully the word of God in its origin, truth, and authority. This, then, is why it is so important to do justice to that witness in terms of its diversity.

27 The New Testament use of “apostle” (ἀπόστολος) varies. My comments here concern those who were apostles of Christ—those chosen and authorized by Christ and having his authority—the original twelve, with Matthias replacing Judas (Acts 1:20–26), Paul (1 Cor. 15:8–9; cf. Rom. 1:5; 1 Cor. 1:1; 9:2; Gal. 1:1, 11–16), and perhaps others. These are the apostles in view in Eph. 2:20 and listed as first in 1 Cor. 12:28 and Eph. 4:11; see the discussion of this apostolate (“apostleship,” Acts 1:25) in Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*, 12–15. In distinction are those “apostles” who served as “messengers” of particular churches (2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25), on a temporary basis and without the plenary authority of the apostles of Christ.

28 The proximate “you” addressed in these verses, I take it, is not indefinite or general but apostolic (the “you” who “have been with me from the beginning”). Only derivatively and only through the apostles (the church *in nuce*) is the “you” addressed the whole church.

### *Diverse Human Instrumentality*

To consider the diversity of the New Testament's witness inevitably draws attention to the factor of human authorship, to the various human authors involved in its origin. The great gain in this approach, however—despite the way it is often put—is not that the Bible's humanity is thereby highlighted and “comes closer to us.” There is some truth in that, but the primary value of this approach is not that the humanity of the Bible is made to stand out so that the Bible becomes a more human book.

The point that we need to be clear on is that in and of itself, this human instrumentality means nothing. That may seem too strong a statement, and it could be construed in a way that would be unfortunate if it diminishes necessary attention to the human characteristics of Scripture. That is not my intention, but from an ultimate point of view, it does not put it too strongly to say that in and of itself, human authorship means nothing.

What Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 is particularly instructive for validating the point at issue here. There he gives unceasing thanks to God for the reception of his preaching by the church in Thessalonica. Undoubtedly, it was *his* preaching. It bore the marks of his personality; his personal characteristics were no doubt reflected in its communication. Yet his description of its reception is striking: “when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really<sup>29</sup> is, the word of God.” Ultimately considered, his preaching with which he was entrusted as an apostle is properly assessed in terms of this stark polarity: not the word of men . . . but the word of God.<sup>30</sup>

On balance, approaching the New Testament in terms of the diversity of its witness will undoubtedly draw our attention to its varied human authorship. But the ultimate value in this approach is that in this way, the full riches of divine revelation become plainer and the manifold wisdom of God in Christ (Eph. 3:8, 10) better articulated. God's word will be received in more of its intended precision and penetrating efficacy as the sharp, two-edged sword that it is (Heb. 4:12).

<sup>29</sup> ἀληθῶς, “truly.”

<sup>30</sup> To see this verse as expressing what is true of the *content* of his preaching (its “message”), but not its verbal, syntactic-semantic *form* introduces a disjunction completely foreign to Paul's statement.

### The Task of Appropriation

Finally, it bears emphasizing that this program of New Testament interpretation—approaching it in terms of the diversity of its witness—has to be carried out with care and discernment. Almost everybody today involved in biblical studies will say that more attention needs to be given to the diversity of the New Testament. But for most—virtually all those committed to historical-critical interpretation—this diversity amounts in large measure to doctrinal confusion, to internal theological contradictions. Pointedly, for many today, diversity is equated with *disunity*. In fact, it seems fair to say that within the current environment of academic biblical studies, the disunity of the New Testament has become a virtual hermeneutical axiom for many; this disunity is more or less an assumption, hardly any longer in need of demonstration.

This contemporary situation can lead to the temptation of overreaction that needs to be resisted. The widespread equating of diversity with disunity must not be allowed to mislead into a too hasty tendency to harmonize or to assert unity. The problem is not with efforts of harmonization where appropriate, and certainly not with seeking to show unity, but with doing that too facilely. To be more specific, we need to be on guard against the tendency of hesitating to stress the diversity and historical particularity of the New Testament materials and all that entails, out of a fear of the specter of a relativizing historicism that would compromise its unity. We ought not to think that we can best defend the unity of the New Testament by toning down on its diversity.

That kind of tactic is wrong, first of all, because it does an injustice to the text, a disservice to the New Testament itself. But also, in the long run, it will result in biblical scholarship that is less credible.

What needs to be recognized and kept in mind is that, at the end of the day, the unity of the New Testament is not something we have to establish or to demonstrate in any constitutive way. Rather, our task is one of appropriation, of accepting what is already there: unity that exists as diversity, diversity that embodies unity. The New Testament is a unity in diversity, an organic wholeness of different parts, a coherence of diverse elements. Unity and diversity are not to be set in opposition or played off against each other.

As noted earlier, the unity in view here is not found in some recurring dynamic action with Scripture, a nonverbal revelatory activity associated

with the text but not predicable of the text as text. Rather, it is a doctrinal, didactic unity present precisely as the diversity of New Testament witness.

The task, challenging but also promising, for New Testament interpreters, pastors, teachers, and others is to recognize this diversity and explore it. As a result, the unity of the New Testament will be seen and heard in more of its multiplex depth and truly symphonic power.





PART 1

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THE THEOLOGY OF ACTS



# Pentecost and the History of Redemption

CLEARLY CENTRAL IN ACTS is what took place on the day of Pentecost. There is no better way, then, to gain a sound overall understanding of Acts than to consider the significance of this key event. Exploring that significance brings to light the pivotal place of Pentecost in redemptive history (the *historia salutis*), or, to be thematically more specific with an eye to Luke's narrative in Acts, *the role of Pentecost in the coming of the kingdom of God*. Several observations show the appropriateness of approaching Acts as a whole by focusing on the redemptive-historical significance of Pentecost.

## THE PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF ACTS: INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

### **The Words of Jesus in 1:8**

Without becoming embroiled here in the much-debated question of the purpose(s) of Acts, it seems fair to observe that Luke clearly structures his narrative in terms of the words of Jesus in 1:8:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

An overarching concern of Luke, then, is to structure his narration in Acts in terms of this witness-bearing, an activity that has its point of departure

in Jerusalem and expands outwardly from there. Or, putting it in clearly intended ethnic terms, a primary aim of Luke, globally considered, is to document how this witness-bearing spread from *Israel to the nations*.

In other words, at least one concern of Luke—surely a basic concern—is to show that history unfolded just as Jesus said it would, to relate certain events that came to pass just as Jesus had prophesied. A bird’s-eye survey of Acts bears this out: the basic line of narration moves from Jerusalem to Rome, “the end of the earth,” where the narrative ends in Acts 28.

Several facets in this description of the purpose of Acts bear elaborating.

First is the *apostolic* factor. The “you” addressed by Jesus in Acts 1:8 is not indeterminate but specifically an apostolic “you.” Its antecedent, working backward in the immediate context from 1:8, is in 1:2: “the apostles whom he [Jesus] had chosen.” Also, “you,” occurring repeatedly beyond 1:2 through 1:11, refers to the apostles and in those references, it is important to see, is *limited* to them.

This focus on the apostles is reinforced in the rest of the chapter. After describing the return of the “you” to Jerusalem following the ascension (1:11), the eleven apostles are mentioned individually by name (1:13), and the main point to the end of the chapter is the reconstitution of the apostolate (1:25) to its original number of twelve with the election of Matthias. So, as Acts 1:8 is fairly seen as indicating what structures the entire narrative in Acts and the “you” there is an apostolic “you,” what Luke documents in Acts *as a whole* is an essentially *apostolic* task.

Second, this task is a *universal* task; the apostolic task is worldwide in its scope. The narrative flow in Acts 1:8, beginning in Jerusalem, reaches to “the end of the earth.” Further, the geographic terms of this worldwide expansion have evidently *ethnic* overtones. Acts documents the witness-bearing of the apostles that moves from Jew (Jerusalem-Judea), to part-Jew (Samaria), to non-Jew/Gentile (the ends of the earth).

The essentially ethnic dimensions of this universalism are put beyond question in Acts 13. At Antioch in Pisidia on his first missionary journey, Paul encountered fierce opposition from among the Jews, especially the religious leaders of the Jewish community (13:45; cf. 13:50), a rejection met, in turn, by the bold response of Paul and Barnabas: “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you [Jews]. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles” (13:46).

This response, then, is followed (1) by the derivative application to their own witness-bearing ministry of what the Lord says to the messianic servant in Isaiah 49:6: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, / that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47); and (2) with Luke’s observation, “And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord” (13:48; cf. 28:28). In the parallelism of the Isaiah quotation, “Gentiles” and “the ends of the earth” correspond to each other and are clearly interchangeable. “The ends of the earth” are specifically Gentile “ends of the earth.”

Acts 1:8 and 13:47 are the only New Testament occurrences of the expression “the ends of the earth.” It seems likely, then, that its use by Jesus in 1:8 echoes the Isaiah passage (cf. Isa. 45:22) and points to the apostles’ impending witness to him as the one who fulfills the promise of universal salvation made to the messianic Servant (see also Acts 26:23). In Acts 1:8, geographic denotation has an ethnic connotation. This ethnic flow of the narrative in Acts points to and reinforces the universality of the apostles’ task.

Assuming that in Acts 13 Luke accurately represents what Paul said, it is legitimate methodologically to introduce several statements from Paul’s letters as further commentary that reinforces the universality of the apostolic task in which, as Acts documents, he was a key participant.

In Colossians 1:5-6, Paul refers to the “gospel, which has come to you, as indeed *in the whole world* it is bearing fruit and increasing.” Later, in 1:23, similarly and more explicitly concerning his own activity, he speaks of “the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed *in all creation*<sup>1</sup> under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.” Similarly, at the conclusion of his ministry, plausibly seen as reflecting on it as a whole, he speaks of his preaching as “fully proclaimed” to “all the Gentiles” (2 Tim. 4:17). As an apostle of Christ (see Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1), then, Paul knew himself to be involved in a gospel ministry not only worldwide in its scope but also already completed (“which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven”).

Third, then, the universal apostolic task that Acts documents is also a *finished* task. This conclusion follows implicitly from what we have so far been considering about the purpose of Acts and is intimated in the

1 Or, “to every creature” (NIV, KJV, NKJV).

statements from Colossians just noted. Acts intends to show that in its universal realization, the apostolic task in view in 1:8 has been completed.

In other words, what Acts does *not* document, what Luke is *not* intending to relate, is an open-ended, partial history that has begun with the ministry of the apostles but is of one piece with and looks for its completion by others who will follow them.

That is the way Acts is sometimes read. Reaching the end of Acts 28, the narrative can appear unresolved and to end on a rather negative note with Paul, its principal subject, a prisoner in Rome under house arrest (28:16, 30). This hardly seems the way to conclude a narrative. What happened to him subsequently? So a part three to Theophilus, no longer extant, has even been hypothesized, in which Luke supposedly wrapped up the loose ends left for us in Acts.

To the contrary, there are no narrative loose ends in Acts. The task as foretold in 1:8 is finished. With the apostolic witness to Christ having reached the Gentile “ends of the earth” (Rome), the narrative that Luke intends is complete; it is not in need of being filled out or supplemented by an Acts 29 and following.

The note on which the document ends signals the successful completion of the apostolic task. The adverb “unhindered” (ἀκωλύτως, 28:31), positioned for emphasis as the last word in the final sentence, has a positive exclamatory force (“without hindrance!”).

The New Testament undoubtedly recognizes that there will be a future for the church after the apostles. It makes provision for that postapostolic future, most notably in the Pastoral Epistles and elsewhere. But that provision is not within the purview of Acts, except incidentally. Rather, in the light of 1:8, Acts documents a *completed, universal, apostolic* task. Acts records the *finished founding* of the “one holy catholic” church as also “apostolic” (the Nicene Creed).

## Two Observations

The importance of this basic conclusion about the purpose and composition of Acts and certain of its implications will emerge as we consider how Pentecost and integrally related events are central to the narrative in Acts. Here, before moving on, a couple of other observations pertinent to this conclusion serve to reinforce it.

First, Acts 1:8 should not, as often happens, be made the theme verse for a missions conference or used to challenge a congregation about its responsibility to support missionaries throughout the world today. “Jerusalem” does not stand for or mean just any congregation, whatever its time or location, with “the ends of the earth” extending out from there. Acts 1:8 is not addressed directly to the church today. It is not a mandate for present worldwide witness. The “you” in Acts 1:8 is not a general “you”; it does not include the church of whatever time and place in history. It is addressed specifically and only to the apostles concerning a worldwide task they eventually completed.

This is not at all to deny or even question the worldwide missionary mandate of the church today. In this regard, comparing Acts 1:8 with Matthew 28:19–20 is instructive. Addressed in both is the same group within the same redemptive-historical context, the eleven prior to the ascension, but there is a difference. In Matthew, unlike Acts, the mandate to disciple the nations is in force “to the end of the age”; that is, until the end of history at Christ’s return. In Acts, the worldwide witness-bearing in view is unique to the apostles in the initial, foundation-laying era of the church (cf. Eph. 2:20).

In Matthew, discipling the nations includes the activity of both the apostles and, by implication, the postapostolic church as it builds on that apostolic foundation by faithfully ministering it. The two passages complement each other. Matthew 28:19–20, then, is the appropriate theme text for this year’s missions conference (and next year’s and any year thereafter until Jesus comes again).

Second, the completion of their universal witness by the apostles also has an important bearing on *the overall eschatological outlook* of the New Testament. To note that briefly here without being able to argue it fully or satisfactorily, “the whole world,” “all nations” (Matt. 24:14) have been evangelized by the apostles; recall again Colossians 1:6, 23 (cf. 2 Tim. 4:17: “so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and *all* the Gentiles might hear it”).

To be sure, the worldwide spread of the gospel by the postapostolic church, its extent geographically, has gone well beyond the Mediterranean world, within which the apostles remained in their witnessing. But in terms of its basic ethnic significance in the history of redemption—from



Jew to include non-Jew—the universal spread of the gospel by the apostles (and those associated with them) has already been completed. Through the apostles, the spread of the gospel has, so to speak, come full or, better, closed circle. Its subsequent spread throughout the world in and through the postapostolic church is not the completing of a circle left open and incomplete by the apostles. Rather, it is an ongoing filling in and expansion *within* the worldwide closed circle completed by the apostles.

In terms of these considerations, then, requisite in principle for the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, Christ could have returned at any time subsequent to the completion of the apostles' witness-bearing. The postapostolic mission of the church will continue until that incalculable time—the day and hour known only to the Father (Matt. 24:36; Mark 13:32)—when Christ will return. In this sense, the New Testament teaches his “imminent return.”

### The Role of Persecution

Worth highlighting in this preliminary assessment of the purpose and structuring of the unfolding narrative in Acts, is the role of *persecution*. Persecution furthers the expansion of the *universal apostolic* witness-bearing until it is *completed*. An important theme in Acts is Jewish unbelief and rejection of the gospel, like the instance in Acts 13 noted above. The effect of this opposition was the exact opposite of what was intended. Rather than succeeding in suppressing the spread of the gospel, the result was its advance.

Instructive in this regard, again, is the ending of Acts. Paul, having reached “the end of the earth” in Rome, was there under some form of house arrest and chained (28:16, 20). Afforded an opportunity by the local Jewish leaders who came to him, he gave them an account of his ministry and sought to persuade them from Scripture about Jesus (28:17–23). The resulting reaction was mixed (28:24), prompting Paul to rebuke with Scripture those who disbelieved (28:25–27), and to declare, “Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen” (28:28).

So, Acts closes on this positive note: over a two-year period, Paul “welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:30–31). We have already commented on the upbeat exclamatory force

of the final “unhindered.” The point is unmistakable: the apostle is “bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!” (2 Tim. 2:9<sup>2</sup>).

### The Focus on Peter and Paul

Basic also to the structuring of the apostolic narrative in Acts is its *focus on Peter and Paul*. Peter is central in approximately the first half (Acts 1–12), being phased out after that and mentioned for the last time for the important role he had at the Jerusalem Council (15:7–11, cf. 15:14). Paul, mentioned briefly for his part in the murder of Stephen (7:58), is introduced with his conversion in Acts 9 and is dominant in the last half (Acts 13–28). Several observations may be made about this dual focus.

First, it has been alleged by some that this concentration on Peter and Paul reflects the fact that Luke is involved in unhistorical stylization for kerygmatic purposes. The “Peter” and “Paul” of Acts are seen as Luke’s own creations, stereotypes that serve as mouthpieces for the extensive speech materials he attributes to them. Without being able to interact extensively with this viewpoint here, suffice it to say that there are enough variations from the pattern of Peter and Paul dominance to challenge this kind of conclusion.

Limiting myself here to the case of Peter, there are, for instance, repeated summary statements regarding the general state and progress of the church that show a concern to establish genuine historical contours (2:43–47; 4:32–35; 5:12–16; 6:7). Also, there are sections of material, some substantial, where Peter is not mentioned: for example, Barnabas and the sale of his land (4:36–37), the speech of Gamaliel (5:34–39), and the events surrounding Stephen in Acts 7. The narrative in the first half of Acts clearly has in view more than the activity and preaching of “Peter.”

On the other hand, it is important to recognize that Luke’s presentation is *selective*. In no sense is Acts a comprehensive or complete account of what went on in the church or with all the apostles in the years immediately following the death and resurrection of Christ. If that is not kept in mind, the result will be a distorted picture of the overall dominance of Peter and Paul.

For example, again keeping to the case of Peter and the early chapters of Acts, Luke’s intention is surely to communicate Peter’s prominence,

2 Though written in the context of a later imprisonment in Rome, this verse aptly applies as well to this initial imprisonment.

perhaps even preeminence. Still, we are to infer the activity and influence the other apostles. For instance, John is associated equally and actively with Peter in the various events of Acts 3–4; the speech material in 4:19–20 is attributed to both.<sup>3</sup> In Acts 5, indeterminate “apostles” are involved with Peter in being arrested (5:18) and subsequently responding to the Sanhedrin (5:29–32, 40). We may assume that was not because they were simply following Peter and John around with their mouths shut! Other indications of substantial activity by other apostles are found in 2:37, 42, 43; 4:33–35; 5:12. This activity is left in the background by Luke, selectively and intentionally.

Second, on balance, the deeper motive for Luke’s concentration on Peter and Paul is not on them simply as individuals, as prominent and heroic persons in earliest church history. His focus is not to present them as spiritual giants or gifted and charismatic leaders, or to show them as exemplary Christians, although they were certainly that, and that comes through in his account. Acts does not provide spiritual biography (other than incidentally, in a partial fashion).

Rather—and here we are brought back to a key consideration already noted—his focus is on Peter and Paul as *apostles* and the nature of their apostolic commission. As more careful study will show, the apostles, as apostles of Christ, are distinguished as especially authorized and empowered representatives of the exalted Christ, by the unique way they represent him and are identified with him. In particular, the authority of Christ is intimately bound up with the person of the apostle in a unique and incommunicable fashion. They speak for Christ as witnesses of his resurrection, and by their witness they function to establish the church’s foundation, understood in a once-for-all historical sense (Acts 1:21–22; Eph. 2:20). In this role, the apostles are personal plenipotentiaries of the risen Christ.<sup>4</sup>

3 Unless we make the unlikely assumption that Peter and John recited in unison and word for word what Luke reports, this instance shows that here and arguably often elsewhere throughout Acts, in presenting speech material Luke does not intend to provide verbatim transcripts but gives accurate, fully reliable digests or summaries of what was actually said. Similarly, Acts 4:24–30 is presented as the spoken response of all those (“they,” 4:24) who heard the report of Peter and John.

4 Although not everything they say and do is authorized, *ex cathedra*, as the justifiable rebuke of Peter by Paul in Gal. 2:11–14 and Peter’s “By no means, Lord” (Acts 10:14) show. My thanks to Dennis Johnson for drawing my attention to the latter incident.

In view of this common personal representation of Christ, then, they necessarily represent each other. In the final analysis, interest in any one apostle is only as he exemplifies the institution of unique authorization and representation established by Christ. Interest in any one apostle is interest in the office by which preeminently the resurrected Christ exercises his authority. In other words, interest in any one apostle and his activity is as he points to *Christ* and what *he*, Christ, is doing.

This is borne out by the opening words of Acts that state that previously, in the first part to Theophilus (cf. Luke 1:3), Luke has given an account of “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). As others have observed, this is fairly taken as suggesting that the second part is an account of “all that Jesus *continued* to do and teach.” Jesus, not the apostles, is the primary subject or actor in the Acts of the Apostles.

Further in this regard, it should be noted that the title “Acts of the Apostles” (Πράξεις Ἀποστόλων) is not part of the document but the designation it received early on in the church. In light of the preceding comments about the focus being on the office rather than on persons, a better alternative might be “Acts of the Apostolate” (cf. Acts 1:25), despite the abstract ring. Better yet, in the light of Acts 1:1, would be “Acts of the Exalted Christ through the Apostles,” or even “Acts of the Exalted Christ by the Holy Spirit through the Apostles”; or, going all out (in quasi-seventeenth-century Puritan style!), “Acts of the Exalted Christ by the Holy Spirit in the Church as Founded by Him through the Apostles.”

Playing with the title like this serves to focus, as an overall perspective on Acts, both its central subject (Christ) as well as the manner in which his action is qualified: by the Spirit, through the apostles, in the church.

Third, Acts—it is worth underscoring here—is the history of the *church* in its foundational era (cf. Eph. 2:20). We should not allow the customary distinction between later ecclesiastical history and biblical history to obscure the fact that the history recorded in Acts is *our* history; here are the apostolic “roots” of the church today and of every other postapostolic generation since its beginning.

Our own discussion has already highlighted and will continue to show that real discontinuities exist between the “then” of the church in Acts and the “now” of any subsequent generation of the church. But “apostolic” and “postapostolic,” with whatever differences there are between them, have a

common denominator: “church.”<sup>5</sup> Our place in the church, in the history of the church today, is within the *one* church whose postapostolic *superstructure* continues being built by the exalted Christ, and whose apostolic origins, the *completed* laying of its *foundation*, Acts documents.<sup>6</sup>

### **Pentecost: A Central and Overall Thesis**

A further, reinforcing comment may be made here for focusing on Pentecost in order to gain an overall understanding of Acts. Hardly anyone will care to dispute that Pentecost is the high point and pivotal juncture in the course of events narrated in Acts. It is in order, then, especially in taking a necessarily selective approach to Acts, to concentrate attention on Pentecost and its significance.

In fact, such a concentration will have the advantage of disclosing an even broader and more basic perspective than we might at first expect—namely, the central place of Pentecost not only in Acts but also in the Lucan double work, in Luke-Acts seen as a unit, or in other words, the central place of Pentecost in the entire history that Luke is seeking to relate to Theophilus. Our overall thesis, somewhat overstated, is that “Pentecost is the great turning-point, the hinge, as it were, of the two-volume narrative.”<sup>7</sup> If, however, we include Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension as integrally associated with Pentecost, as we will see Luke-Acts does, then this becomes a valid and illuminating thesis.

### **New Testament Revelation as an Organism**

Before beginning to explore this thesis and in order to facilitate doing that, it will be helpful to conclude our preliminary observations about the study of Acts by revisiting a basic point already noted in the introduction: New Testament revelation is an *organism*; the revelation recorded in the New

5 An issue, as large as it is important, in seeking to determine how the New Testament applies to the life of the church today is to assess properly both the continuities and the discontinuities between the apostolic and postapostolic periods of the church.

6 Eph. 2:11–22, esp. 2:19–22, suggest this distinction between completed (apostolic) foundation and not yet finished (postapostolic) superstructure to describe the one church-house building project of God, the master architect-builder, underway in the period between the resurrection and return of Christ.

7 G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit: A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation in the New Testament and the Fathers* (London: SPCK, 1967), 192.

Testament has an organic character as its diverse parts cohere and constitute a unified whole. Among other considerations, this means that, though each part of the New Testament is not equally important—some parts are more important than others—still every part is integral in the specific sense of that word. Each part—no matter how relatively unimportant—belongs to and serves to constitute the whole, so that the whole does not exist without it. No part is dispensable.

This point—the organic composition of the New Testament as a whole—needs to be insisted upon over against a persistent tendency that has manifested itself in the history of interpretation, particularly in the historical-critical tradition stemming from the Enlightenment but even before then. This is the tendency to seize upon the teaching of Jesus and then contrast it with the teaching of the apostles and other New Testament writers in a way that depreciates the latter.

Often at work in this tendency is, as it might be put, a kind of superficially irresistible logic: Because of his person, the teaching of Jesus is more pure and profound, the more basic expression of the truth. Because of the person, because the person is incomparable, therefore—so the reasoning goes—the teaching must be incomparable, in a class all its own and superior to the teaching of all others.

This kind of reasoning is reflected, innocently no doubt for the most part, in red-letter editions of the New Testament. But where this approach takes hold at a deeper or more substantial, I dare say, pernicious level, the aim has been to get in back of the teaching of the New Testament writers, the teaching particularly of Paul and others, to get back behind their allegedly peripheral, less important, and at points erroneous statements to the pure teaching of Jesus. The teaching of Jesus uncovered by this approach then becomes, in effect, a canon within the canon, the corrective standard for judging other teaching found in the New Testament.

A radical instance of this sort of approach in recent decades, one that at one point received a fair amount of media attention, is the work of the Jesus Seminar. Its members cast black, white, or gray marbles regarding the authenticity of statements about Jesus in the New Testament in order to establish what in their judgment he actually said and did (or, more often, did *not* say and do). Another instance is the so-called Jesus-Paul controversy, prominent in the early decades of the twentieth century and by no means

dead today. It consists in large part of attempts to play off the teaching of Jesus against that of Paul at the expense or depreciation of Paul.

It is not difficult to point out the fallacy often at work in such approaches. The only access that we have to Jesus is through the apostles and other New Testament writers. Jesus did not leave a written legacy as part of his earthly ministry. We know of Jesus only from what others—namely, the New Testament writers—have told us about him. In that sense, we have no access to the “pure” unmediated Jesus.

It is apparent, then, what this approach is really doing. A reconstructed Jesus—whose teaching, it usually turns out, looks remarkably like that favored by the person the reconstructing critic sees in the mirror—becomes the Jesus for evaluating the teaching of the New Testament as a whole.

In this regard, Vos makes a valuable overall observation regarding the organic makeup of New Testament revelation: In his earthly ministry, Jesus is not “the exhaustive expounder of truth”; rather, he is “the great fact to be expounded.” Further, the relationship between Jesus and the apostles is “in general that between the fact to be interpreted and the subsequent interpretation of this fact.”<sup>8</sup>

Negatively—contra the critical approach just noted—in his earthly ministry, Jesus did not, nor did he intend to, provide a comprehensive or stand-alone presentation of the truth. Approached on the assumption that he did, his teaching will inevitably be misunderstood and distorted. Positively, by God’s design in terms of the unfolding history of special revelation, which includes the emergence of the New Testament canon with its specific shape, Jesus’s person and work, word and deed—his earthly ministry considered in its entirety with its implications—is the subject matter for interpretation and elaboration by the apostles and New Testament writers.

This entails that the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of the apostles complement each other so that in important respects apart from each other their intelligibility is impaired. Each in relation to the other is an incomplete fragment, a truncation.

Instead, on the one hand, the teaching of the apostles and other New Testament writers provides *necessary amplification and elaboration* of the

8 Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 302-3.

teaching of Jesus. This is all the more so since, as we noted earlier, their teaching is from the perspective of fulfillment that has taken place, from this side of the cross and resurrection. On the other hand, correlatively, the teaching of Jesus provides *important roots* for the teaching of the apostles; his teaching supplies key presuppositions and incipient aspects of theirs.

In light of this revelation-historical state of affairs—given this grounding provided by the teaching of Jesus during this earthly ministry—it will be useful both for our further work in Acts and then later in Paul to briefly review the main emphases in the teaching of Jesus, to recall something of its basic structure.