

SEMINAR – READING THE GOSPELS THEOLOGICALLY

[Includes a Summary of the Seminar: “Brief Introduction to Theology—How to Read the Bible Theologically”]

By Bob Young

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS SEMINAR: Reading the Bible Theologically

Introduction

→ Those who preach and teach, and every Christian, must be concerned about how we read, study, and present the Bible and its message

- We must seek consistency with the original text, the “what is said and what it meant” informs the “what it says and what it means”
- We must seek accuracy and completeness
- Illustration: Guatemala, series of 20 Bible studies, no lesson about God

→ In another seminar, I introduce and outline a process for studying the Bible

- It is good to understand the process of reading, understanding, interpreting, applying
 - Seek background information—historical and cultural context
 - Establish the literary and biblical context—linguistics, syntax, grammar, vocabulary
 - *Establish the theological context*
 - Establish paragraphs, complete thoughts
- This seminar explains the concept of theological context.

→ The question is not only how to read the Bible, but how to read the Bible theologically

Christians are either practical theologians or theological practitioners

Every Christian is concerned with two things—the message of Scripture and the application of the message. These are our theology and our practice. The preacher, Bible class teacher, and evangelist who presents the whole counsel of God must choose to be either a practical theologian or a theological practitioner, or both.

- Always the focus of the sermon or class is on the message of Scripture, but the message must never exist for the sake of the message. The message always leads to application. This is the two-fold task of the theologian—always asking what the text says, always asking how the text is to be applied in practice. Paying attention to both tasks, the theologian is correctly seen as a practical theologian.
- Seldom is the message preached only to inform. A good sermon or class seeks to change actions and lives. It must therefore focus on practice and action, always be informed by the theology of the text. This is the task of the practitioner who seeks a theological orientation. Paying attention to both dynamics, the practitioner is correctly seen as a theological practitioner.

We understand what is meant by practice or action. What do we mean when we talk about theology?

Theology

When I write about theology, I am writing and teaching or doctrine. I am writing about the content of the Bible. For example, I have noted that theology classes at a Christian university have different titles: New Testament Theology, New Testament Doctrine, New Testament Teachings; New Testament Thought.

Theology is literally the study of God. The word also has a wider application. Theology classes often identify different types of theology.

- Biblical theology, of a book, author, Old Testament, New Testament, genre
- Systematic theology, topical theology
- Practical theology, what to do
- Historical theology
- In our study of the Bible, we are most interested in the first two—Biblical theology and systematic theology

Biblical theology

- Can be divided into Old Testament and New Testament theology
- Often seeks parallels between the Old Testament and the New Testament
- We can speak of the theology of particular authors or particular books
- We can speak about the theology that characterizes genres, prophetic theology, apocalyptic theology

Systematic or topical theology suggests specific general categories for Bible study

- God (theology proper)
- Revelation, Bible, knowledge (epistemology)
- Mankind, human creation (anthropology; also has wider meaning in social studies)
- Christ (Christology)
- Holy Spirit, spiritual realities (pneumatology)
- Sin (hamartiology)
- Salvation (soteriology)
- Church (ecclesiology)
- Last things, end of time (eschatology)

In a specific book, one can identify theological topics of interest to the author, e.g. Lucan theology, Marcan theology

Two ways of reading and studying the Biblical text in sermon or class preparations

Theological reading and study seeks to integrate theology and practice. For some, this is a new way of reading and studying Scripture. This does not change the message of Scripture, but it helps answer the question of how one understands the message.

A **traditional way** of using the Bible to prepare classes or sermons

- Often begins by thinking about applications rather than beginning in the text
- Is often centered in topics. What does the Bible say about _____?
- Usually, the student uses a concordance to find those words
- The good student may seek related words or synonyms
- One may overlook relevant words. For example, in studying salvation, may not think to look for redemption or reconciliation.
- One may fail to find passages that deal with the topic but do not use the words one has in mind. A good example is the book of Esther and the study of God. The book of Esther never uses the word God but says much about the presence of God with his people.
- One may fail to think about important theological categories. A good example is the lessons in Guatemala that did not include a study of God.

The **theological way** of studying or reading the Bible

- This approach does not begin with topics but begins in the text
- What is the theology, doctrine (teachings), thought?
- What does the Bible say in this specific text?
- What is the message of this text? What are the principal teachings and themes of this text?
- This approach demands that the student read, reread, and read again the text to discover repeated words and concepts.
- This approach suggests that the wider context of a Bible passage includes other passages with a parallel conceptual basis. For example, where are the "sin stories" in Genesis, and what do they contribute to the theology of the book of Genesis?

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Reading the Gospels Theologically to Prepare Sermons or Classes

Introduction

Reading the Gospels theologically is a difficult, time-consuming process because of the length of the books.

Therefore, it is helpful to have some suggestions to help one look for specific themes. Many study Bibles have such helps.

Reading theologically requires...

Reading the Bible and specific books of the Bible with “new eyes”

Asking new questions of the Bible books or passages being studied

- What is the principal message?
- What are the themes, topics, and words used by the author to advance the message?
- How does the message fit into the outline of the book? (Can one identify the author’s outline, not what is your outline?)
- What other parts of the Bible have a similar message? (expanding understanding of the context)

Overview of the Bible study process for class and sermon preparation

[Note: This is the ideal. It is recognized that the average preacher will have difficulty finding time to accomplish this process each week in the preparation of each sermon or class. However, over a period of time, the process becomes easier because one builds on the reading and study done previously.]

Theological reading

- Read and reread the text, noticing words, phrases, themes, purpose statements, etc.
- Establish the theme or the text to be studied, identify tentative limits of the text or limits of the thematic study
- Identify a tentative message for the sermon or class, consistent with the message of the text.
- Identify a purpose statement for the sermon or class, what is to be accomplished? How does the purpose statement reflect the message you have chosen?

Begin the process of exegesis to verify the validity of the textual and thematic limits

- Vocabulary
- Grammar
- Syntax
- Establish text, context, and limits
- Verify the message or principal point, shaping sermons and classes in the shape of Scripture insofar as is possible or practical

Interpreting and applying the text

- Interpretation of the text depends on a good theological reading and exegesis
- What application of the text will be used in this sermon or class?
- Ideally, the application of the text in the sermon should be consistent with the original intent of the text or author
- There is an expository preaching model that uses the biblical text for secondary applications

Writing the sermon or class

Establish a purpose statement for the sermon

- Why should this sermon be preached?
- The purpose statement depends on the needs of the congregation
- Examples: Inform, convince, inspire, motivate to action
- Illustration of a tree: roots are knowledge, trunk is conviction, branches are inspiration, and the fruit is action. The purpose of the tree always points toward the fruit. The purpose of the sermon (knowledge/information, belief/conviction, emotional acceptance/inspiration) always points toward changed lives and actions

Decide what sermon structure will best allow the communication of the message

- Biblical outlines: text, expository, expository analytical, textual analytical (analyzing various aspects or details of the text)
- Narrative; example-explanation-application; narration with application; analogy; thematic; biography; logical; problem resolution; sequence; organization by time, space, persons, etc.

Decide how the sermon will “touch” the mind and heart (mental and emotional) of the hearer

SESSION #1

Reading theologically: Matthew

The best way to understand the concept of theological reading is to give specific examples. The student will find help in this process in a good study Bible edition, but there is no substitute for beginning with the text and reading the text repeatedly. [Ideally, one would read, reread, and read again the text of Matthew to discover the answers to these questions. Here, we will simply suggest the results of that process based on the work of the seminar presenter.]

- How should one or can one outline the book of Matthew?
- What is the relationship of the outline of Matthew to the general outline of the Synoptic Gospels? [use common narratives, for example, the Passion Predictions]
- What is the importance of Matthew's prologue (chapters 1-4) for our understanding of the Gospel of Matthew?
- What details in the historical or cultural context are significant in Matthew's Gospel?
 - The context of Matthew is the first century Judaism
 - A major concern in Matthew is how the gospel can be presented to the Jews
 - This dynamic informs the nativity story (wise men and kings)
 - This dynamic informs the parenthetical reference to "God with us" (1:23 and 28:20)
- How is Matthew different from the other Synoptic Gospels? The dissimilarities reveal the specific emphases of the different writers.
- What are the outstanding or characteristic themes or topics of Matthew? [The usual process is to identify and understand these by reading the book repeatedly.]
- What is the primary message of Matthew? How can we describe, or how should we understand, the message that Matthew intended for his first century readers?
- Again, we will be helped in this process by exploring and historical backgrounds. For example, what is the importance of Matthew's background, in Judaism, as a tax collector?
- Possible themes or topics (suggested by a careful reading of the text)
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____

Matthew was written to a Jewish audience as the primary recipients

- This is seen in the genealogy, multiple references to Abraham
- The use of various terms familiar to the Jews, e.g. Son of David
- Old Testament citations, the purpose of showing that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies
- The "proofs" that God was in control of Jesus' coming as Messiah, e.g. dreams, 14 generations, etc.
- The presence of the Lord, compare 1:23 and 28:18-20

Who is Jesus in Matthew's Gospel?

- Names: Jesus, Emmanuel, Christ (Messiah, Anointed), ch. 1-2
- Identity stories: genealogy, names, royalty, Son of God, participant in the human experience
- Jesus' disciples (instead of apostles)

Understanding Matthew against the General Structure of the Synoptic Gospels

- Identity stories (1-4)
- Narrative and discourse interspersed (D5-7, N8-9, D10, N11-12, D13, N14-17, D18, N19-23, D24-26, N27-28)
- Feeding of 5000 (14)
- Confession of Peter (16)
- Predictions of death (16, 17, 20)
- Transfiguration (17)
- Triumphal Entry (21)
- Passion Week (21-27)
- Resurrection (28)
- Great Commission (28)

The Discourses of Jesus in Matthew

- Five discourses (5-7, 10, 13, 18, 24-25)
- See 7.28, 11.1, 13.53, 19.1, 26.1
- Messages about the Kingdom
- Perhaps parallel to Pentateuch

Internal Markers for Outlining

- From then on (4:17; 16:21)
- Jesus comes teaching, preaching, and healing (4:23; 9:35-38)
- Jesus comes dying (16:21)
- Discourses and narratives alternate (D5-7, N8-9, D10, N11-12, D13, N14-17, D18, N19-23, D24-26, N27-28)

SESSION #2

Reading theologically: Mark

The best way to understand the concept of theological reading is to give specific examples. The student will find help in this process in a good study Bible edition, but there is no substitute for beginning with the text and reading the text repeatedly. [Ideally, one would read, reread, and read again the text of Mark to discover the answers to these questions. Here, we will simply suggest the results of that process based on the work of the seminar presenter.]

- How should one or can one outline the book of Mark?
- What will be the relationship of the outline of Mark to the general outline of the Synoptic Gospels? [identify common stories to establish correspondence, for example, the Passion Predictions]
- What is the importance of Mark's prologue (chapters 1) for our understanding of the Gospel of Mark?
- What parts of the historical context are especially significant in Mark's Gospel?
 - The context of Mark is the first century Roman world
 - What is Mark's purpose?
 - What is one to make of questions surrounding the "ending of Mark"?
- How is Mark different from the other Synoptic Gospels? The dissimilarities reveal the specific emphases of the different writers.
- What are the outstanding or characteristic themes or topics of Mark? [The usual process is to identify and understand these by reading the book repeatedly.]
- What is the primary message of Mark? How can we describe, or how should we understand, the message that Mark intended for his first century readers?
- Again, we will be helped in this process by exploring and historical backgrounds. For example, what is the importance of Mark's background?
- Possible themes or topics (suggested by a careful reading of the text)
 - Touch
 - Servant Lord
 - Fear and faith
 - The Cross
 - Discipleship (the identity of the true disciple)
 - Amazing words and works
 - Teachings of Jesus (rabbi, teacher)
 - Messianic secret
 - Son of God, Son of Man

Backgrounds

- John Mark as author, was not an apostle
- The date is early, ~A.D. 50
- Connections and references to Rome
- Gospel, 1:1

Understanding Mark against the General Structure of the Synoptic Gospels

- Identity stories (1)
- Stories and teachings (1:14-6:12)
- Feeding of 5000 (6)
- Confession of Peter (8)
- Predictions of death (8, 9, 10)
- Transfiguration (9)
- Triumphal Entry (11)
- Passion Week
- Resurrection
- Great Commission (16)
- Questions about the manuscripts (16:9ff)

Outline of Mark

- Who is Jesus (1-4)
 - Works and words
 - Fear and faith
- Who can be a follower/disciple of Jesus (5-8), see 8:22
- Who will be a disciple of Jesus (8-10), see 10:46
- [8:22-10:45, predictions of Jesus' death]

SESSION #3

Reading theologically: Luke

The best way to understand the concept of theological reading is to give specific examples. The student will find help in this process in a good study Bible edition, but there is no substitute for beginning with the text and reading the text repeatedly. [Ideally one would read and reread the text of Luke to discover the answers to these questions. I share answers based on my own study.]

- How should one or can one outline the book of Luke?
- What will be the relationship of the outline of Luke to the general outline of the Synoptic Gospels? [for example, the Passion Predictions]
- What is the importance of Luke's claim in 1:1-4 for our understanding of Luke?
- What parts of the historical context are especially significant in Luke's Gospel?
 - The context of Luke is the first century Roman Empire
 - A major concern in Luke is how the gospel will go to certain classes of people among the Gentiles, especially those without value in the Roman societal structures
 - This dynamic informs the nativity story (shepherds instead of wise men or kings)
 - This dynamic informs the reversal stories where the wrong person "wins"—publicans instead of Pharisees, Samaritans instead of Jews, the son who leaves home instead of the son who remains home and sees himself as a slave, the astute servant, etc.
- How is Luke different from the other Synoptic Gospels? The dissimilarities reveal the specific emphases of the different writers.
- What are the outstanding or characteristic themes or topics of Luke? [The usual process is to identify and understand these by reading the book repeatedly.]
- What is the primary message of Luke? How can we describe or understand the message that Luke intended for his first century readers? [The nature of Jesus' mission as Messiah?]
- Again, we will be helped in this process by exploring and historical backgrounds. For example, what is the importance of the fact that Luke himself is a Gentile?
- Possible themes or topics (suggested by a careful reading of the text)
 - The gospel for the Gentiles; universalism; recognition of both Jews and Gentiles in God's eternal plan (2:30-32; 3:6; et.al.)
 - The mission of Jesus as Messiah
 - The gospel for all; including women, the poor, children, the disenfranchised
 - Special concern for role of women
 - Special interest in the poor (rich/poor reversals)
 - Special attention paid to sinners
 - Special attention paid to the concepts of repentance, redemption
 - Emphasis on the family circle, frequent events in homes
 - Repeated use of Messianic title, Son of Man
 - An emphasis on the Holy Spirit and the spirit world
 - An emphasis on prayer, especially Jesus' prayers before important events
 - Joy as a response to the announcement of the gospel or "good news" (10:21)
 - The frequent use of reversal stories
 - Rhythms or cycles in Jesus' ministry
 - More parables than in any other gospel (unique parables)
 - Emphasis on praising God as a response (1:64; 24:53; Acts)
 - Journey themes

What does this theological reading of Luke say about the sermons or classes one can develop from the book?

- Who is Jesus?
- A Savior for all [Jesus, Son of Man, identifies with the human predicament]
- The nature of personal faith
- Commitment, discipleship
- Repentance
- The role of women in Luke's Gospel
- The nature of the gospel
- The kingdom of reversals
- The prayers of Jesus
- The rhythms of life
- Understanding life's options (6:17-49)
- Think carefully about how one can preach various parables in a manner consistent with Luke's theology and purpose. For example, how should we preach the parables of the Good Samaritan or Prodigal Son?

Background

- Author is Luke, note reference to Theophilus in Acts, medical doctor, excellent Greek
- Date is in the 60s or a little later
- 1:1-4, purpose, to give resources, "certainty"
- Gospel to the Gentiles
- 3:1-3

Unique Aspects of Luke's Gospel

- Reversal stories
- 1:51-53, 6.20ff, 7.36ff, 10.25ff (Good Samaritan), 12.13ff (rich fool), 15.11ff (two sons), 16.19ff (rich man and Lazarus), 17.11ff (thankful Samaritan); compare Acts 17:6
- Messianic title, Son of Man

Understanding Luke against the General Structure of the Synoptic Gospels

- Identity stories (1-4)
- Stories and teachings (5-9)
- Central point of Jesus' ministry
 - Feeding of 5000 (9)
 - Confession of Peter (9)
- Predictions of death (9, 9, 18)
 - Journey narrative (9-19)
 - Transfiguration (9)
 - Unique content in 10-19
- Triumphal Entry (19)
- Passion Week
- Resurrection
- Great Commission (24)

SESSION #4

Reading theologically: John

The best way to understand the concept of theological reading is to give specific examples. The student will find help in this process in a good study Bible edition, but there is no substitute for beginning with the text and reading the text repeatedly. [Ideally, one would read, reread, and read again the text of John to discover the answers to these questions. Here, we will simply suggest the results of that process based on the work of the seminar presenter.]

- How should one or can one outline the book of John?
- What will be the relationship of the outline of John to the other Gospels?
- What is the importance of John's prologue (chapters 1) for our understanding of the Gospel of John?
- What parts of the historical context are especially significant in John's Gospel?
 - The universal context of John
 - What is John's purpose?
- How is John different from the other gospels? The dissimilarities reveal the specific emphases of the different writers.
- What are the outstanding or characteristic themes or topics of John? [The usual process is to identify and understand these by reading the book repeatedly.]
- What is the primary message of John? How can we describe, or how should we understand, the message that John intended for his first century readers?
- Again, we will be helped in this process by exploring and historical backgrounds. For example, what is the importance of John's background?
- Possible themes or topics (suggested by a careful reading of the text)
 - Life
 - Light
 - Love
 - Cosmic gospel
 - Worlds, worlds (cosmos) in conflict, where can one find order (cosmos)?
 - Values, spiritual vs. physical
 - Unity
 - Holy Spirit (esp. 7, 14-17)
 - Last Things
 - Signs
 - "I am"
 - Faith, believe

Backgrounds

- John as author, is apostle
- Date is near the end of the first century
- Compare the Gospel, the Letters, Revelation
- Study the historical and cultural context

The Cosmic, Eternal Gospel

- Cosmos vs. chaos
- Logos, logical, communication, the Word
- Universal gospel
- Who is Jesus (1, 5:18, 8:58)
- Theology, anthropology, Christology, pneumatology (hamartiology, soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology)

Structure of the Gospel

- Prologue (1), epilogue (21)
- Ministry to the disciples, public ministry
- Miracles and signs (2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, resurrection)
- Persons (3, 4, 4, 5, 9, 11)
- Feeding of 5000 (6)
- Triumphal Entry (12)
- Teachings (3, 5-8, 10, 12, 14-16)
- Great Commission (20)
- Epilogue (21)

Other Helps for Reading Theologically

- The purpose of the signals
- "The Jews" (written against the Jews?)
- Testimony (5)
- "I am"
- Prayer of Jesus (17)