GOD'S KINGDOM

through

GOD'S COVENANTS

A CONCISE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

THE IMPORTANCE OF COVENANTS IN GRASPING THE BIBLE'S STORY

> The idea of covenant is fundamental to the Bible's story. At its most basic, covenant presents God's desire to enter into relationship with men and women created in his image. This is reflected in the repeated covenant refrain, "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Exodus 6:6–8; Leviticus 26:12 etc.). Covenant is all about relationship between the Creator and his creation. The idea may seem simple; however, the implications of covenant and covenant relationship between God and humankind are vast ...[1]

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate how central and foundational "covenants" are to the entire narrative plot structure of the Bible. One cannot fully understand Scripture *and* correctly draw theological conclusions from it without grasping how *all* of the biblical covenants unfold across time and find their *telos*, terminus, and fulfillment in Christ. We do *not* assert that the covenants are *the* central theme of Scripture. Instead, we assert that the covenants form the backbone of the Bible's metanarrative and thus it is essential to "put them together" correctly in order to discern accurately the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Michael Horton nicely captures this point when he writes that the biblical covenants are "the architectural structure that we believe the Scriptures themselves to yield.... It is not simply the concept of the covenant, but the concrete existence of God's covenantal dealings in our history that provides the context within which we recognize the unity of Scripture amid its remarkable variety."[2] If this is so, which we contend it is, then apart from properly understanding the nature of the biblical covenants and how they relate to each other, we will not correctly discern the message of the Bible and hence God's self-disclosure which centers on and culminates in Christ.

This is not a new insight, especially for those in the Reformed tradition who have written extensively about the importance of covenants and have structured their entire theology around the concept of covenant. Yet it is not only Reformed theology that acknowledges this point; almost every variety of Christian theology admits that the biblical covenants establish a central framework that holds the Bible's story together. Since the coming of Christ, Christians have wrestled with the relationships between the covenants, especially the old and new covenants. In fact, it is almost impossible to understand many of the early church's struggles apart from covenantal debates. For example, think of the many issues concerning the Jew-Gentile relationship in the New Testament (Matt. 22:1–14, par.; Acts 10–11; Romans 9–11; Eph. 2:11–22; 3:1–13); the claim of the Judaizers, which centers on covenantal debates (Galatians 2–3); the reason that the Jerusalem Council assembled (Acts 15); the divisions between strong and weak in the church (Romans 14–15); and the question of how to live in relation to the old covenant now that Christ has come (Matthew 5–7; 15:1–20, par.; Acts 7; Romans 4;

[1] Alistair I. Wilson and Jamie A. Grant, "Introduction," in *The God of Covenant: Biblical, Theological, and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Jamie A. Grant and Alistair I. Wilson (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2005), 12.

[2] Michael S. Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 13.

Hebrews 7–10). All of these issues are simply the church wrestling with covenantal shifts—from old covenant to new—and the nature of covenant fulfillment in Christ.

Christians have differed in their understanding of the relationship between the covenants. This is one of the primary reasons that we have different theological systems, which is best exemplified today by the theologies of dispensationalism and by covenant theology. Even though these two views agree on the main issues central to the gospel, at the heart of these two systems there is disagreement on what the biblical covenants are and how they relate one to another. Thus, beyond our basic agreement that the story of Scripture moves from Adam to Abraham to Sinai, ultimately issuing in a promise of a new covenant whose advent is tied with Jesus' cross work (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26), there is disagreement on how the covenants are related. This disagreement inevitably spills over to other issues, especially the question of what applies to us today as new covenant believers. It is at this point, on such matters as the Sabbath, the application of the Old Testament law to our lives, the relationship between Israel and the church, and many more issues, that we discover significant differences among Christians.

For this reason, correctly "putting together" the biblical covenants is central to grasping the Bible's story, drawing correct theological conclusions, and rightly applying Scripture to our daily lives. If we are going to make progress in resolving disagreements within the church, then how we put together the biblical covenants must be faced head-on and not simply assumed. We are convinced that the current ways of putting together the covenants, especially as represented by covenant or dispensational theology, are not quite right, even though it is important *not* to overplay the differences among us. All Christians seek to do justice to the overall unity of God's plan, and to acknowledge some kind of "progressive revelation," redemptive epochs (or "dispensations"), fulfillment in Christ, change in God's plan across time, and so on. Yet there is disagreement in regard to the specifics of God's plan, the kind of changes that result, and the relationship between Israel and the church, which still requires resolution. What follows is an alternative reading of the covenants, which seeks to build on the insights of both of these theological systems while offering a slightly different way of understanding the unfolding of the covenants and their fulfillment in Christ.

"Kingdom through covenant" or "progressive covenantalism" is our proposal for what is central to the Bible's storyline. *Progressive* underscores the unfolding of God's plan from old to new, while *covenantalism* stresses that God's unified plan unfolds *through* the covenants, ultimately terminating and culminating in Jesus and the new covenant. Our triune God has only *one* plan of redemption, yet we discover what that plan is as we trace his salvation work *through* the biblical covenants. Each and every biblical covenant contributes to that one plan, but in order to grasp the full depth and breadth of that plan, we must understand each covenant in its own redemptive-historical context by locating that covenant in relation to what precedes it and what follows it. When we do this, not only do we unpack God's glorious plan; we also discover how that plan is fulfilled in our majestic Redeemer (see Heb. 1:1–3; 7:1–10:18; cf. Eph. 1:9–10). In addition, given that Christians live in light of the achievement of Christ's glorious work, we can apply Scripture rightly to our lives only if we think through

how all of the previous covenants find their fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant he inaugurates .

Before we unpack "kingdom through covenant," in the remainder of this chapter and in preparation for chapters 2–10 we will focus on two issues. First, we will briefly discuss how we conceive of the nature of biblical theology and its relation to systematic theology, since this book is an exercise in both disciplines and, sadly, there is no unanimous agreement in regard to these disciplines. Second, we will outline our hermeneutical approach in this study and thus describe something of our theological method. Let us now briefly turn to each of these areas.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND ITS RELATION TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Any attempt to understand the progressive nature of the biblical covenants is an exercise in "biblical theology." It is also the first step in drawing legitimate theological conclusions from Scripture and thus applying the "whole counsel of God" to our lives, which is the task of "systematic theology." Since people mean different things by "biblical" and "systematic" theology, let us explain how we are using these terms and how we understand the relationship between them.

At the popular level, for most Christians, when the term "biblical theology" is used it is understood as expressing the desire to be "true to the Bible" in our teaching and theology. Obviously, to be "biblical" in this sense is what all Christians ought to desire and strive for, but this is *not* exactly how we are using the term. In fact, in church history, "biblical theology" has been understood in a number of ways.[3]

Generally speaking, before the past few centuries biblical theology was often identified with systematic theology, even though many in church history practiced what we currently call "biblical theology," that is, an attempt to grasp the redemptive-historical unfolding of Scripture.[4] One can think of many examples, such as Irenaeus (c. 115–c. 202), John Calvin (1509–1564), and Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669). In this sense, biblical theology is not entirely new, since the church has always wrestled with how to "put together" Scripture, especially in light of Christ. Any position, then, that seeks to think through the Canon is doing "biblical theology" in some sense. Granting this point, it is still accurate to note that, in the past, there was a tendency to treat Scripture in more logical and atemporal categories rather than to think carefully through the Bible's developing storyline. Even in the post-Reformation era, where there was a renewed emphasis on doing a "whole-Bible theology," biblical theology was mostly identified with systematic theology, and systematics was identified more with "dogmatic" concerns.

With the rise of the Enlightenment, however, biblical theology began to emerge as a distinct discipline. But it is crucial to distinguish the emergence of biblical theology in the Enlightenment along

[3] For a history of biblical theology, see C. H. H. Scobie, "History of Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) [hereafter *NDBT*], 11–20.

[4] For an example of this approach to biblical theology see Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

two different paths—one, an illegitimate path tied to Enlightenment presuppositions, and the other, a legitimate one that developed previous insights in church history but now in a more precise, detailed, and historically conscious manner, dependent upon the Bible's own internal presentation.

In regard to the illegitimate Enlightenment approach to biblical theology, there was a growing tendency to read Scripture *critically* and uncoupled from historic Christian theology. This resulted in approaching Scripture "as any other book," rooted in history but also open to historical-critical methods which viewed the Bible within the confines of *methodological* naturalism.[5] This meant that the Bible was not approached on its own terms, i.e., as God's Word written. Instead, the idea that Scripture is God-breathed through human authors—a text that authoritatively and accurately unfolds God's redemptive plan centered in Christ—was rejected. The end result of this approach was not only a denial of a high view of Scripture but also an increasingly fragmented reading of Scripture, given the fact that the practitioners of this view did not believe Scripture to be a unified, God-given revelation. Biblical theology as a discipline became merely "descriptive," governed by critical methods and non-Christian worldview assumptions. "Diversity" was emphasized more than "unity" in Scripture, and ultimately, as a discipline seeking to grasp God's unified plan, it failed. In the twentieth century, there were some attempts to overcome the Enlightenment straitjacket on Scripture, but none of these attempts produced a "whole Bible theology," given their low view of Scripture.

Contrary to the Enlightenment approach, there is a legitimate way to do biblical theology. In the history of the church, specifically in the post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment era, this path also emphasized a renewed attempt to root the Bible in history by stressing the "literal sense" (*sensus literalis*) tied to the intention(s) of the divine and human author(s). Yet, it was rooted in a larger Christian worldview and, as such, it operated self-consciously within Christian theological presuppositions, as illustrated in such people as Johannes Cocceius and the post-Reformation Reformed Protestant scholastics who came after him.[6] Probably the best-known twentieth-century pioneer of biblical theology, who sought to follow a path distinct from that of the Enlightenment, was Geerhardus Vos, who developed biblical theology at Princeton Seminary in the early twentieth century.[7] Vos, who was birthed out of Dutch Calvinism, along with such figures as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck,

[5] "Methodological naturalism" is the view that approaches the study of history (including study of the Bible) and science without considering God's involvement in the world, and divine action as represented by divine revelation and miracles. *Methodological* naturalism does *not* necessarily entail atheism, since it is also consistent with deism and panentheism (both Enlightenment views), which also deny God's action in an effectual sense.

[6] For a detailed treatment of the post-Reformation Protestant scholastics, see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003). See also the application of some of the insights of the Protestant scholastics for biblical and systematic theology in Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).

[7] See Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2004); Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

sought to do biblical theology with a firm commitment to the authority of Scripture. Vos defined biblical theology as "that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible."[8] In contrast to the Enlightenment view, Vos argued that biblical theology, as an exegetical discipline, not only begins with the biblical text; it must also embrace Scripture as God's own self-attesting Word, fully authoritative and reliable. Furthermore, Vos argued, in exegeting Scripture, biblical theology seeks to trace out the Bible's unity and diversity and find its consummation in Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant era. Biblical theology must follow a method that reads the Bible *on its own terms*, following the Bible's own internal contours and shape, in order to discover God's unified plan as it is disclosed to us over time. The path that Vos blazed was foundational for much of the resurgence of biblical theology within evangelicalism, in the twentieth and now twenty-first century.

Following this evangelical view, we define "biblical theology" by employing Brian Rosner's helpful definition: "Biblical theology" is "theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus."[9] In this definition, Rosner emphasizes some important points crucial to the nature and task of biblical theology. Biblical theology is concerned with the overall message of the whole Bible. It seeks to understand the parts in relation to the whole. As an exegetical method, it is sensitive to the literary, historical, and theological dimensions of Scripture, as well as to the interrelationships between earlier and later texts in Scripture. Furthermore, biblical theology is interested not merely in words and word studies but also in concepts and themes as it traces out the Bible's own storyline, on the Bible's own terms, as the plotline reaches its culmination in Christ. In a similar way, D. A. Carson speaks of biblical theology as an inductive, exegetical discipline which works from biblical texts, in all of their literary diversity, to the entire Canon—hence the notion of *intertextuality*. In making connections between texts, biblical theology also attempts to let the biblical text set the agenda. This is what we mean by saying that we are to read Scripture *on its own terms*, i.e., *intratextually*. Scripture is to be interpreted in light of its own categories and presentation, since Scripture comes to us as divinely given, coherent, and unified.[10] In fact, it is our contention that if one asks the most basic questions—How has God given Scripture to us? What are the Bible's own internal structures? How ought those structures shape our doing of biblical theology?—working through the biblical covenants is the Bible's own way of presenting its internal structures and learning how to read Scripture as God intended it to be read.

With these ideas in mind, let us now summarize what we believe biblical theology is. Simply stated, it is the *hermeneutical* discipline that seeks to do justice to what Scripture claims to be and what it actually is. In regard to its *claim*, Scripture claims to be *God's* Word written, and as such, it is a *unified* revelation of his gracious plan of redemption. In regard to what Scripture actually *is*, it is a *pro-*

[8] Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 5.

[9] Brian Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 10 (italics removed from original).

[10] On these points see D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 89–104.

gressive unfolding of God's plan, rooted in history and developed along a specific storyline primarily demarcated by the biblical covenants. Biblical theology as a hermeneutical discipline attempts to exegete texts in their own context and then, in light of the entire Canon, to examine the unfolding nature of God's plan and carefully think through the relationship between *before* and *after* in that plan, which culminates in Christ.[11] In so doing, biblical theology provides the basis for understanding how texts in one part of the Bible relate to all other texts, according to God's intention, which is discovered through human authors but ultimately at the canonical level. In the end, biblical theology is the attempt to think through the "whole counsel of God," and it provides the basis and underpinning for all theologizing.

If this is what biblical theology is, then what is systematic theology? As with "biblical theology," there are various ideas as to what "systematic theology" is. It is not necessary to delve into all of these diverse views; rather, we will simply state how we conceive of the discipline. For our purposes, we will employ the definition given by John Frame: systematic theology is "the application of God's Word by persons to all areas of life."[12] In our view, this entails at least two key components.

First, in order to *apply* Scripture properly, we must first interpret Scripture correctly, which requires the doing of biblical theology, as just described. This is why we contend that biblical theology is the basis for all theologizing, since we are not doing theology unless we correctly understand how the entire canon of Scripture fits together.

Second, systematic theology goes further than biblical theology, since it involves the *application* of Scripture *to all areas of life*. Systematic theology, then, inevitably involves theological construction and doctrinal formulation, grounded in biblical theology and done in light of historical theology, but it also involves interacting with all areas of life—history, science, psychology, ethics, and so on. In so doing, systematic theology leads to worldview formation as we seek to set the biblical-theological framework of Scripture over against all other worldviews and learn "to think God's thoughts after him," even in areas that the Bible does not directly address. In this important way, systematic theology presents a well-thought-out worldview, over against all of its competitors, as it seeks to apply biblical truth to every domain of life. As a discipline it is also *critical* in seeking to evaluate ideas within and outside the church. *Outside* the church, systematic theology takes on an apologetic function as it first

[11] Two words that describe how biblical theology seeks to interpret texts first in their immediate and then in their canonical context are *synchronic* and *diachronic*. *Synchronic* refers to viewing events occurring at a given time, hence to read texts synchronically means reading them in their immediate context. As we exegete texts, we place them in their redemptive-historical context, we interpret them according to the grammatical-historical method, and we inquire about the theology of a particular prophet, book, or corpus. Biblical exegesis begins at this level as it involves an analytical examination of the "parts." Our interpretation of Scripture, however, does not end here. The unity of Scripture drives us to say more, which introduces the notion of diachronic. *Diachronic* refers to viewing events over time. Texts must be read not only in terms of their immediate context but also in terms of the "whole." Scripture is both unified and progressive. Thus biblical theology is concerned to read the "parts" in terms of the "whole" and to trace out how God's plan develops *throughout* redemptive-history, leading us to Christ.

[12] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 76.

sets forth the faith to be believed and defended, and then critiques and evaluates views that reject the truth of God's Word. In this way, apologetics is properly a subset of systematic theology. *Within* the church, theology is critical by analyzing theological proposals first in terms of their fit with Scripture and secondly in terms of their implications for other doctrines. In all these ways, systematic theology is the discipline that attempts "to bring our entire thought captive to Christ" (see 2 Cor. 10:1–5), for our good as the church and ultimately for God's glory.

How, then, should we think of the relationship between biblical and systematic theology? In our view, biblical theology is primarily a *hermeneutical* discipline, since it seeks to rightly divide God's Word (2 Tim. 2:14–15). This is why the conclusions of systematic theology must first be grounded in the exegetical conclusions of biblical theology. But then systematic theology goes further: on the basis of biblical theology it attempts to construct what we ought to believe from Scripture for today, to critique other theological proposals within the church, and also the false ideas of non-Christian worldviews, so that we learn anew to live under the Lordship of Christ.

How does this discussion apply to what we are doing in this book? In this book we are setting forth a proposal for understanding the nature and interrelationships of the biblical covenants. In truth, we are *doing* systematic theology by first grounding it in biblical theology. In order to make our case, we will expound the biblical covenants before we turn to systematic reflection. But before we do this, let us outline the basic hermeneutical approach we will follow.