LESSON 1

RIGHTLY READING SCRIPTURE

INTRODUCTION

During the Second Missionary Journey, the Apostle Paul and Silas stayed briefly in the city of Berea, having fled persecution in Thessalonica after having been there for only a few weeks. Luke, writing the account of the stay, singled out the Bereans for particular commendation, saying: "***These*** [Bereans] ***were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so***" (Acts 17:11). Paul's commendation is not just that the Bereans were receptive to the Gospel, which they were, but that they evaluated his claims by searching the Scriptures. This is serious dedication to being "Bible believing," which we compare poorly with today. A key hallmark of historic Protestantism is a commitment to the preeminent authority of the Bible. However, many people, if they read the Bible at all, read it devotionally: a few verses or a short passage with some inspirational thoughts by the devotional writer. Such an approach reveals more about the mind of the devotion writer than that of the LORD, who inspired all Scripture. **So, what does it mean to be "Bible believing"**?

Our tendency as modern Protestants is to think of the Bible solely as our guide to salvation. Some will piously say that the Bible is "God's love letter to His people," but given the many hard things in the Bible, that would be a most curious "love letter." The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) says Scripture is clear regarding *matters of salvation* (WCF I.7), and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms (WLC, WSC) also observe that the Bible is more than just about how to be saved: "The Scriptures principally teach, *what man is to believe concerning God*, and *what duty God requires of man*" (WLC 5, WSC 3, emphasis added). Indeed, WLC 6 expands on this to say, "The scriptures make known what God is, the persons in the Godhead, his decrees, and the execution of his decrees." Scripture is "The *whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life*" (WCF I.6), the "*supreme judge of all controversies*" (WCF I.10), and the *only rule of faith and obedience to direct us in how we may glorify and enjoy God* (WLC 3, WSC 2). **Scripture is the foundation of the Christian worldview**.

That said, the Bible is complex. WCF I.7 forthrightly acknowledges this when it says, "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all." The Bible is made up of 66 individual books, with genres encompassing historical narrative, law code, poetry, wisdom literature, romance, epistle, and apocalypse. It was written over a period of 1,500 years by some 40 authors, each with their own unique style. At the same time, since these books were infallibly inspired by God, God is the ultimate author, and all Scripture is the very Word of God. That means that despite the diversity in the Bible there is also a fundamental unity to it. **To be like the Bereans, then, we need to read Scripture not only continually, but also consistently, believing that the narrative and the doctrines in it cohere in a unified whole.**

CONFESSIONAL READINGS

Westminster Confession of Faith

CHAPTER I (sect. 6-7, 9-10)--*Of the Holy Scripture*

6. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men. [a] Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: [b] and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed [c]

   [a] 2 Tim. 3:15–17; Gal. 1:8–9; 2 Thess. 2:2
   [b] John 6:45; 1 Cor. 2:9–15; Eph. 1:18; 2 Cor. 4:6
   [c] 1 Cor. 11:13–14; 1 Cor. 14:26, 40

7. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: [d] yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. [e]

   [d] 2 Pet. 3:16
   [e] Ps. 119:105, 130; Deut. 29:29, Deut. 30:10-14; Acts 17:11

9. 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. [f]

   [f] Acts 15:15–16; John 5:46; 2 Pet. 1:20–21

10. The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined; and in whose sentence we are to rest; can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. [g]

    [g] Matt. 22:29, 31; Eph. 2:20; Acts 28:25; 1 John 4:1-6

Westminster Larger Catechism	Westminster Shorter Catechism
Question 3 **Q.** ***What is the word of God?*** **A.** The holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the word of God, [(a)] the only rule of faith and obedience. [(b)] [(a)] 2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pet. 1:19–21 [(b)] Eph. 2:20, Rev. 22:18–19, Isa. 8 :20, Luke 16:29, 31 Gal. 1:8–9, 2 Tim. 3:15–16	**Question 2** **Q.** ***What rule has God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him?*** **A.** The word of God, which is contained in the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, [(a)] is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him. [(b)] [(a)] 2 Tim. 3:16, Eph. 2:20, [(b)] 1 John 1:3-4
Question 5 **Q.** ***What do the scriptures principally teach?*** **A.** The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man. [(a)] [(a)] 2 Tim. 1:13	**Question 3** **Q.** ***What do the scriptures principally teach?*** **A.** The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man. [(a)] [(a)] 2 Tim. 1:13, 2 Tim. 3:16

Westminster Larger Catechism
Question 6 **Q.** ***What do the scriptures make known of God?*** **A.** The scriptures make known what God is, [(a)] the persons in the Godhead, [(b)] his decrees, [(c)] and the execution of his decrees. [(d)] [(a)] Heb. 11:6 [(b)] 1 John 5:7 [(c)] Acts 15:14–15, 18 [(d)] Acts 4:27–28

DELVING DEEPER

I. Reading Scripture Holistically

Given the complexity of the Bible, we need to know how read Scripture rightly. Most books explaining how to study the Bible are only a partial help, as they typically focus on two things: exegesis and hermeneutics. **Exegesis** looks at where a passage is situated in the overall context of a book, analyzes the logical organization and flow, and observes key words in the passage. Knowing the original languages can be an asset in this regard. **Hermeneutics** includes understanding the historical context behind the passage, assessing what the author intended, what the original readers understood it to mean, and what it can mean to us today. **Exegesis aims to understand what a text says; hermeneutics**

gets at what a text means. Both go together. Scripture interprets Scripture (WCF I.9). Such books on how to study the Bible, however, do not go beyond this, and thus, Christians are left to fend for themselves in reckoning how different parts of the Bible relate to one another. But if we are to read the Bible rightly, then we need some kind of **Biblical Theological** approach. Here we use the term in a technical sense. It is not simply the notion that all theology should be based on the Bible but it is a particular way of reading the Bible that grapples with its fundamental unity and diversity, with how the Old Testament relates to the New in both change and continuity, and with how the canon of Scripture came together.

Two theologians have made noteworthy observations about the task of biblical theology and the nature of Scripture. Geerhardus Vos, in his landmark 1949 book, *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments*, defined biblical theology as "that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible." Vos (1862-1949) was a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1893-1932 and he defined the term in a way that put God at the center, contrary to the critical theories of his day, which saw Scripture merely as a product of historical evolution. For Vos, **biblical theology is not just about God but tries to understand how God revealed Himself through His Word over time**. It is an historical approach to Scripture, capturing the unfolding narrative of the Bible over time. It complements systematic (dogmatic) theology, which looks at the doctrines of the faith from the perspective of Scripture as a completed whole. Practically, Biblical theology gives us the *vision of God's redemptive working through history*, whereas systematic theology helps us *understand the details of God's truth*, so we may better live the Christian faith. In looking at the diversity and unity of the Bible, Vos discerned four factors fundamental to the character of Scripture:

1. **The Bible is progressive**. This means that God's revelation unfolded over time, rather than all at once.
2. **It is organic**. The Bible unfolded organically, like a tree developing from a seed to full maturity.
3. **It is realistic**. Scripture was grounded in the actual circumstances of history, in real time and space.
4. **It is occasioned.** God gave Scripture in response to the practical religious needs of His people rather than for abstract speculation.[1]

These observations set a baseline in evaluating different ways of reading the Bible. Does a given approach help us to see how the Bible unfolds organically and progressively over time in response to the needs of God's people? If we accept Scripture as wholly God's truth, then we need to view in this way, rather than as an abstract interpretive prism imposed on the text. Understanding this helps us appropriately evaluate different ways of reading the Bible.

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[1] Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1948), 4-8.

Supplementing Vos's observations are those from Yale scholar Brevard Childs (1923-2007) in his 1992 book, *Biblical Theology, A Proposal* regarding the relationship of the two Testaments to each other.[2] Childs argued, first, **that there is fundamental stability and unity to the biblical text.** Earlier critical scholars said the text of the Old Testament was constantly in flux and that the Jewish canon was not finalized until late in the first century AD. If true, this would make the Bible unreliable. Childs observed, however, that the Hebrew Bible seemed to be fixed before the first century AD. The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, writing in the first century AD, listed the books of the Hebrew Scripture, and his list contained all the books that compose our Old Testament. Childs recognized that the Jews putting the Bible together believed the books of the Bible were religiously authoritative in their lifetimes, and such an understanding would have mitigated temptations to alter the text and would have fostered extra care in assembling the canon of the Old Testament. Moreover, in the debates between Jesus and the Pharisees in the Gospels, both sides presumed the same set of biblical books, and neither accused the other of using books that were not accepted as canonical. Even in debates between Christians and Jews, both used the same texts and neither cited from the Apocrypha, as no one saw those books as authoritative.

Second, Childs said that **there is an essential continuity between the New and Old Testaments.** He observed that in the New Testament period, Christian witness to Christ depended on the Old Testament. This meant that Christians needed to adopt the commonly accepted Hebrew canon. The juxtaposition of the two testaments to form the Christian Bible arose not simply to establish a historical continuity between Israel and the church, but as an affirmation of theological continuity. A most striking feature in the juxtaposition of the two testaments is the lack of any Christian editorial activity on the Old Testament. The New Testament is neither a commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures, nor a revision of them, nor a rejection of them. The New Testament is incomprehensible apart from the Old. The Old Testament is promise, while the New is fulfillment.

For Childs, **biblical theology needs to reflect on the unity of the testaments and the relationship of them to the life of the community**. It needs to respect the original integrity of each Testament and the continuities and discontinuities between them, hearing the whole of Christian scripture in light of the full reality of God in Jesus Christ. These are observations that conservative Reformed and evangelical Protestants can readily affirm.

II. Reading Scripture Wrongly

The observations Vos and Childs made regarding the character of Scripture—namely, that the Bible unfolds progressively, is organic, realistic, occasioned, and exhibits a fundamental stability and an essential continuity between the Old and New Testaments—set baseline assumptions for how we should read Scripture. Although Reformed Protestants read Scripture with a covenantal hermeneutic—and that is what we will use for the remainder of this course—that is not how many people read Scripture. So, before we turn to a covenantal

[2] Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology, A Proposal* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

approach, it is worth examining three major alternative ways which many non-Reformed Protestants read Scripture: "Law and Gospel," Dispensationalism, and Critical Theology. While these approaches are different from one another, all foster a *dis*continuous reading of Scripture, rather than a cohesive one.

The "Law and Gospel" Hermeneutic

The "Law and Gospel" approach uses the soteriological doctrine of justification by faith alone as the prism through which to interpret all of Scripture, and is most commonly associated with the Lutherans. While Martin Luther himself did not explicitly come up with it, it accords with his general view that the primary emphasis of the Law is to convict men of their sins and it is reflected in subsequent Lutheran writings and confessions.[3] The essence of this hermeneutic is that in every passage one should look for something to convict us ("Law") and something that speaks of the Gospel.[4] The purpose of this way of reading Scripture is to move people to dependence on the sufficiency of Christ. Its strength is in its focus on the Gospel and Christ, and it is well-suited to preaching. At the same time, it does not explain the historical aspects of Scripture or its progressive unfolding and it does not naturally arise out of the text. It is notably subjective, since there is ambiguity as to how to exegete texts to neatly fit into either the category of Law or Gospel. As a result, in the past century such subjectivity has fostered liberalism in Lutheran circles, with theologians creating a canon of preferred texts within the canon of Scripture to emphasize "Gospel" over "Law." Such subjectivity also means that orthodoxy is a process to be achieved, not doctrines to be rested upon.

Many American Evangelicals have propounded a variant Law-Gospel distinction to Scripture. In this, they see Law and Gospel not in every text of Scripture, as the Lutherans would, but in the division between the Old and New Testaments, with the Old Testament being "Law" and the New Testament being "Gospel." In reality, this does not accurately reflect the content of the two Testaments, since one can find elements of Law and Gospel in both Testaments. It also *de facto* marginalizes the Old Testament, akin to the ancient heresy of Marcionism. Marcion was a leading Gnostic heretic in the mid-second century AD who thought that the God of Old Testament was harsh and judgmental, while the God of the New Testament was loving. Accordingly, Marcion considered the only

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[3] Horace Hummel, "Are Law and Gospel a Valid Hermeneutical Principle?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 2-3, pp. 181, 184-185.

[4] C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1929). The definitive statement of the "Law and Gospel" approach was given by C. F. W. Walther (1811-1887), the first President of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the President of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. In a series of lectures in 1884-85 on "The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel," Walther said that Law and Gospel are found throughout the Bible, and this is the lens through which all of Scripture is interpreted. Law and Gospel must be kept distinct, although this need not lead to simplistic dichotomies between the human and the divine or the Old and New Testaments. Law must precede Gospel in its articulation, since Law prepares man for the Gospel by showing him his need. As W. H. T. Dau noted in the preface to the 1929 published version of Walther's lectures, this approach is necessary because God confronts man at all times in His holy will and His gracious will and man needs to know where he stands according to either will.

valid texts of Scripture to be Luke's Gospel and most of Paul's letters, thereby bowdlerizing the canon of Scripture. Approaches through the centuries that dismiss the relevance of the Old Testament to the Christian faith thus tend to follow in Marcion's footsteps.

The Dispensational Hermeneutic

Among American Evangelicals, Dispensationalism is the predominant hermeneutical approach, even if many are not familiar with that name per se. Dispensationalists have often presented their hermeneutic as simply the "literal" way of reading the Bible, as opposed to an "allegorical" way. Unlike the "Law and Gospel" hermeneutic, it is a coherent system rather than just an interpretative principle. It was developed by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), an Anglo-Irish evangelist, who posited a sharp distinction between law and grace, a radical separation between the "earthly" and "heavenly" peoples of God in Israel and the Church respectively, and a heavy emphasis on premillennial **eschatology**. C. I. Scofield (1843-1921) expanded upon Darby's ideas in notes for a study Bible published in the early 1900s, which became the bestselling study Bible ever.

Unlike the "Law and Gospel" approach, Dispensationalism self-consciously has tried to be historically grounded. Scofield saw biblical history divided into different epochs,[5] each of which involved a test which God gave man and man inevitably fails, thereby showing salvation is entirely of God. In a sense, Dispensationalism sees a kind of a repeat of Adam's sin in the Garden throughout the different dispensations. These dispensations were seen as rigidly separated from one another, which meant that God's promises to a people in one dispensation *only* applied to them. Thus, in practice, *the* key doctrine in Dispensationalism is not the dispensations, but the difference between ethnic Jews ("Israel") and Christians ("the Church").[6] Because each dispensational period is considered to be self-contained, God's promises to earthly Israel apply only to the Jewish people, and the church will not share in these blessings. This division into two peoples drives the heavy emphasis Dispensationalists place on end times theology (eschatology), since they see Christ's establishment of a literal 1,000 year kingdom as the only way God can fulfill His promises to the Jews.

In practice, the concept of rigidly separate dispensations emphasizes God's judgment rather than His historical redemptive working. This begs the question as to why the dispensations are necessary if Christ's work alone is sufficient for salvation. Moreover, the idea there are two peoples of God—Jews and Christians—leads in effect to two separate ways of salvation, although most

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[5] Classic Dispensationalism, ala Scofield, envisioned seven dispensations: (1) Innocency (Eden before the Fall); (2) Conscience (from the Fall to the Flood); (3) Human Government (from the Flood to Babel); (4) Promise (from Abraham to the Israelites' sojourn in Egypt); (5) Law (from the Exodus to John the Baptist); (6) Grace (the present church age until the Second Coming of Christ); and (7) Kingdom (the reign of Christ from His Second Coming until the Final Judgment). Other Dispensationalists have come up with different dispensations.

[6] In recent decades, Progressive Dispensationalist scholars have moderated the hermeneutic, recognizing more connections between Jews and Christians and more applications of the Old Testament promises to the church, but still hold a distinction between the two groups.

Dispensationalists will deny this. In the end, Dispensationalism fosters a discontinuous reading of Scripture, which means that most of the Old Testament is irrelevant for Christians, thus bringing into question the unity of Scripture, and ending up with a bowdlerized canon of Scripture.

The Historical-Critical Hermeneutic

Whereas Evangelicals have tended to gravitate toward Dispensationalism in the past century, theological liberals and modernists have gravitated toward a historical-critical hermeneutic. In our day, there is much talk of various kinds of Critical Theory which academically and culturally have come into prominence in the last fifty years, but in theological studies critical theories have been around since the 1700s, drawing on fundamentally skeptical and atheistic assumptions stemming from the European Enlightenment. Unlike Dispensationalism and the "Law and Gospel" approach, there is not a single overarching hermeneutic promoted by historical-critical theologians but a wide range of often contradictory views. Historical criticism, also known as "Higher Criticism,"[7] tries to take history seriously, especially the progressive nature of Scripture's composition, the human literary styles and genres, and the situation of the original recipients. Nevertheless, such higher critics do not assume that Scripture is the word of God, but rather, that it is a particular people's reflection on the "divine."

The weaknesses of this hermeneutic are manifold. First, all critical methods approach the biblical text from a starting point of skepticism which leaves historical judgments open to revision and fundamentally uncertain. They assume that if things like miracles do not happen today, then they could not have happened in the past either.[8] Such assumptions lead toward a radical skepticism. The most extreme example of this is the emergence of a set of scholars known as biblical minimalists, who go so far as to assert that there never was an ancient Israel because all testimony from or linked to the Bible is suspect. While most critical scholars are not that extreme, they do radically revise biblical chronology and significantly question the reliability of Scripture. Second and related, historical criticism emphasizes the divisions of Scripture against the possibility of unity and leads to creating a "canon within a canon" by rejecting or accepting the traditional books of Scripture as they judge appropriate. In their view, the Bible possibly *could contain* the words of God, but *is not itself* the Word of God.

Critical scholars are divided among themselves because there is no single unifying methodological approach. Source critics, for example, who have discounted the unity of the Pentateuch on the basis that the proposed sources underlying the text were poorly stitched together by an unknown editor, are in turn contradicted by redaction critics who observe the same books show a high degree of literary coherence. In reality, one cannot have it both ways. Summing

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[7] J. I. Packer, "Higher Criticism" in the *New Geneva Study Bible* (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 2044.

[8] See Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible; Methodology or Ideology?* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1990), 83-103, and Robert B. Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus* (Phillipsburg NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1995), 7.

up his critique, Childs said that "The paradox of much of Biblical Theology [as a critical movement] was its attempt to pursue a theological discipline within the framework of the Enlightenment's assumptions that necessarily resulted in its frustration and dissolution."[9] We would add that such a divided and contradictory way of reading Scripture is not the way to read the Bible.

III. How Christ Taught Us to Read Scripture

The hermeneutical approaches we have just looked at do not bring Scripture together, are inorganically developed, and see Scripture as discontinuous. If God has revealed Himself to us, then clearly there must be a better way of reading Scripture, one that binds it together, that explains its unfolding development, and that provides a narrative focus. But what would constitute a better approach? Moreover, does the Bible itself gives us insight how it should be interpreted? To the latter question, we would suggest that it does. In two post-resurrection appearances in Luke's Gospel, **Jesus explained to His disciples how the Scriptures all point to Him**. In the first instance, He came alongside two disciples on the road to Emmaus who were mulling over the event of the crucifixion and the reports of His resurrection. They did not recognize Him at first and when He queried them, they recounted what happened over the previous days.

> ***Then he*** [Jesus] ***said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken:*** [26] ***Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?*** [27] ***And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.*** (Luke 24:25-27)

In the second instance, He met with the Disciples and gave them proofs as to the reality of His resurrection.

> ***And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.*** [45] ***Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scripture.*** (Luke 24:44-45)

Luke (and the other Gospel writers) give only glimpses as to what Jesus did in the forty days between His resurrection and His ascension, but by highlighting these two appearances and not others, Luke makes the point that the fundamental lesson Jesus wanted the disciples to learn before He ascended was how to read the Bible. They needed to know that since after He bodily departed from them what they would have left is His Word. The fact that Christ says the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms—a formula corresponding to the three major literary groupings in the Hebrew Scriptures (*Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*, with latter literally meaning "the Writings")—all point to Him shows that the totality of

[9] Childs, 12.

Scriptures is about Him, not just select portions. Christ's people needed—and still need—to know this.

But what does it mean that all of Scripture points to Christ? In antiquity and in the Middle Ages, many Christian thinkers adopted a hermeneutic approach of allegory, with the aim of trying to see Christ in all of Scripture. This approach devolved into subjectivity and mysticism. The Reformed tradition, however, has rightly recognized that the most organic and best way to see Christ in all of Scripture is covenantally. In the ancient world, covenants were the legal mechanism by which a suzerain king would bind a vassal to him and regulate their relationship, holding out blessings as an incentive for obedience and sanctions to punish disobedience. In the Bible, God's covenants with His people explain both the change and development of the redemptive historical narrative. It is through the unfolding of the covenants that we see Christ and His Kingdom as the true King and the true Kingdom, whose coming was foreshadowed in the Old Testament and inaugurated in the New Testament. God's judgment and His grace, His desire for a people for Himself to commune with, His love for them, and His desire that they reflect Him, all relate to this covenantal thread.

This covenantal hermeneutic was not something the Reformers came up with out of thin air. Church historian Richard A. Muller has shown that even before the Reformation Medieval theologians and scholars began making a turn toward interpreting the Bible better on exegetical grounds, as part of the Renaissance interest in getting back to the sources (*ad fontes*).[10] The desire was to understand the Bible on its own terms as a comprehensive whole rather than merely as a sourcebook for the Church's dogmatics. The Reformers developed this approach further during the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, fleshing out the centrality of the covenant to interpreting the Bible. We will begin unpacking this in the following lessons.

For Review

1. Define "exegesis," "hermeneutics," and "Biblical Theology." How do these concepts relate to one another?
2. What are six observations that Geerhardus Vos and Brevard Childs make about the character of Scripture?
3. What are three common ways to read Scripture? Do they provide a sense of the coherence and cohesiveness of Scripture? Why or why not?
4. What does the lesson present as the proper biblical theological approach to Scripture?

[10] Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2, 2d ed., Holy Scripture; The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic 2003), 213-223, 524.

CONCLUSION

This course is an introduction to covenant theology, but it will be more than just that. We will go through the standard covenantal divisions—the Covenant of Works in Adam and the Covenant of Grace in Christ; the Covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the New Covenant—but we will also discuss the biblical history between these covenants, so as to get a sense of context and the unfolding redemptive-historical narrative. This will entail looking at some of the lesser-known covenants beyond those just listed. We will see how the biblical books cluster along a series of seven compositional periods and how that helps us to recognize the biblical narrative as real history, as well has how to rightly contextualize the different books of the Bible. Augustine of Hippo once said that Christ is in the Old Testament concealed, and in the New revealed. We will see that as we go through our survey of Scripture. And, because all Scripture points to Christ, we will conclude the course with a multi-lesson study on the doctrine of Christ, as laid out in the Westminster Standards. The goal of this course, therefore, is not only to know Scripture better but to know our Lord better.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Have you read through the Bible? What did you learn from that? What did you find challenging?

2. Have you ever wondered how to make sense of the totality of Scripture? What questions have this lesson answered or raised?

3. Have you encountered some of the problematic ways of reading Scripture mentioned in this lesson? What has your experience with them been like?

4. What are some takeaways from this lesson that you found interesting? Why were they interesting to you?

5. Based on this lesson, what are some expectations that you have for this course?

AFTERWORD

The focus of this lesson has been on the need to have a biblical theological approach to reading Scripture. In terms of the current contemporary approach on how to read Scripture exegetically and hermeneutically, two books are recommended: *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (now in its fourth edition) and *God-Centered Hermeneutics* by Vern Poythress. Although I disagree with Fee and Stuart regarding Bible translations (they are bullish on modern translations, whereas I think those based in the Textus Receptus are to be preferred), their book is excellent in helping readers understand the different literary genres of Scripture and they have wise words regarding the use of commentaries. Poythress's book is a good introductory primer on hermeneutics. Most books on hermeneutics seems to focus on methodology—i.e., how to go about deriving meaning from a biblical text—and Poythress is no different. Many books on hermeneutics can veer into the highly technical but Poythress is exceptional in explaining the concepts in a clear, accessible manner while still providing a fairly comprehensive overview of the topic. While these two books are good exemplars and certainly worth having in one's library, my issue with them and with the current approach more generally on how to read the Bible is less in what they say, but in the fact that they do not go far enough. It is one thing to know that God, as the ultimate author of Scripture, provides the unifying thread behind the books the Bible; it is another thing to articulate what that thread actually is. Poythress, et al, does the former but leaves it up to readers to discern the latter. It is the contention of this course that covenant theology provides that unifying thread.

The must-read book on Biblical Theology is Geerhardus Vos's book of the same name, *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments*. Vos himself admits that he would have preferred to title the book something along the lines of the history of special revelation, but the publisher disagreed with that. Although that probably would not have been any more attractive or understandable from a sales perspective, it would have been more descriptive and more accurate. Vos's focus is on how God revealed Himself in a progressive manner throughout the entirety of biblical history. It is groundbreaking in its insights, as well as a throughgoing refutation of critical biblical theology as that had developed through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Vos has been inspirational to subsequent generations of Reformed scholars and it would be no exaggeration to say that he is the father of biblical theology in the modern Reformed tradition. One is also strongly encouraged to read Vos's other works as well, including his systematic theology, *Reformed Dogmatics*; his natural theology in the eponymously named, *Natural Theology*; and his shorter writings in the book, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.

The question of how to see Christ in all of Scripture and the relationship between the Old and New Testaments has been a key focus for many scholars in the past fifty years. Greg Beale has focused his professional career on the connections between the Old and New Testaments and has produced a number of excellent studies and reference works. Among these are: *Handbook on the New*

Testament Use of the Old Testament, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (with D. A. Carson), and *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (with D. A. Carson, Benjamin Gladd and Andrew Naselli). Some other notable works in this regard, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* by Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* by Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* and *The Unfolding Mystery, Discovering Christ in the Old Testament*, both by Edmund Clowney, *Old Made New, A Guide to the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* by Greg Lanier, and *Seeing Christ in All of Scripture, Hermeneutics at Westminster Theological Seminary*, by a number of the seminary's professors.

In terms of the alternative approaches highlighted in this lesson—Law and Gospel, Dispensationalism, and Historical (or Higher) Criticism—there is little on the Law and Gospel approach that this writer has found beyond C. F. W. Walther's book, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, from the nineteenth century. Walther's work still seems to be the standard for this approach.

In contrast, many books have been published providing an overview and critique of Dispensationalism. A succinct but strong-perhaps even harsh—indictment of Dispensationalism can be found in John H. Gerstner's booklet, *A Primer on Dispensationalism*. More nuanced, irenic, and recent critiques have been made by Vern Poythress in his *Understanding Dispensationalists* and by Robert McKenzie in his *Identifying the Seed, An Examination and Evaluation of the Differences Between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology*. Poythress focuses more on how Dispensationalists reach their hermeneutic conclusions, and thus tries to understand them on their own terms. As the subtitle to McKenzie's book indicates, he is more focused on comparing Dispensationalism with covenant theology. Since contemporary Dispensationalism is not monolithic, another useful book is *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism, A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, edited by Herbert W. Bateman IV. This book is a series of essays by Dispensational theologians about differences between the traditional Dispensationalism of C. I. Scofield and more recent scholars like Darrell Bock. Understanding these differences is important in avoiding caricatures when engaging current Dispensationalists.

Regarding historical criticism, one is most likely to encounter this in scholarly works, such as commentaries, or in works about religion written by non-theologians. Most conservative theology opposes historical criticism, so critiques are ubiquitous. Some good introductions include *Historical Criticism of the Bible, Methodology or Ideology* by Eta Linnemann, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus* by Robert B. Strimple, and *Can We Trust the Gospels* by Peter J. Williams. Linnemann, in particular, is noteworthy as she herself was an accomplished German historical critical scholar in the tradition of Rudolf Bultmann, who came to see the fallacies of that approach and ended up leaving academia as a result. Strimple and Williams show the pervasive skepticism that colors historical critical thinking.