

THE UNITY OF THE SCRIPTURES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS:

Biblical and Systematic Theology

To speak of the unity of the Scriptures is important, especially in light of the seeming diversity within them. The books of the Bible were penned by many writers over a period of 1500 years and in various forms (narrative, laws, poetry, preaching, epistle, apocalyptic, etc.). There are two Testaments which give some the impression there are two subjects- Israel and the church. Modern Scholarship may even give the impression there is diversity speaking of Pauline or Petrine theology. It is imperative for a proper understanding of Scripture to recognize the unity that runs through Scripture even as we acknowledge the diversity of forms, authors and historical contexts. And one of the most important implications of this unity is that we can from the Scriptures as a whole arrive at a systematic theology. Only if Moses, David, Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, and Peter were teaching the same truths (doctrines) can we confidently allow the Scriptures- to interpret the Scriptures. This is what we call the Analogy of Faith.

One of the first observations to make concerning the Scriptures is that its parts take that unity for granted. Nowhere do we find one part dealing with that which has proceeded either by redefining doctrines, tearing down and replacing teachings, or justifying additions. Rather that unity is taken for granted. Biblical writers never hesitated to build on what had proceeded, picking up themes, re-enforcing and expanding doctrine, interpreting what had come before and applying it to their situations. Throughout the Scriptures one senses a strong feeling of unity and coherence.

There is a clear unity of doctrine through the Scripture. What is taught in one place is assumed and supported in others. One can indeed interpret one passage in terms of the rest and the whole. The whole Bible agrees concerning God, His nature, attributes and actions; man, his creation, his fallenness and need for grace; the Savior, his nature and work; and God's purposes and promises. F.F. Bruce says: "The Bible's central message is the story of salvation, and throughout both testaments three strands in this unfolding story can be distinguished: the bringer of salvation, the way of salvation and the heirs of salvation. This could be reworded in terms of the covenant idea by saying the central message of the Bible is God's covenant with men, and that the strands are the mediator of the covenant, the basis of the covenant, and the covenant people. God himself is the Saviour of His people; it is He who confirms His covenant mercy with them. The bringer of Salvation, the mediator of the covenant is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The way of salvation, the basis of the covenant, is God's grace, calling forth from his people a response of faith and obedience. The heirs of salvation, the covenant people are the Israel of God, the Church of God. (New Bible Dictionary , p. 139.) Christ, and the Salvation God brings through his redeeming work, is the unifying feature of the Bible.

The unity of the Bible needs to be stressed in regard to the relationship between the two Testaments. Some have understood that relationship to be one of contrast: a God of war and judgment vs. a God of love, Salvation by works of law vs. Salvation by grace, Judaism vs. Christianity. We must not fall into the error of thinking that modern Judaism is a continuation of Old Testament faith and practice for even by Christ's day it had departed (for example, the Pharisees and the Sadducees) much more in the following centuries. Some see it in terms of imperfect and perfect - primitive and advanced, hidden and revealed. Some go so far as to reject any real unity of the Testaments by setting God's relationship with Israel (by the Mosaic law) completely apart from God's relationship with the Church (by grace). This is a difficult task in view of the organic unity (mutual dependence) of the Old and New Testaments. To some the ceremonies and symbols of the Old Testament have little significant spiritual and doctrinal significance for the New Testament believer.

On the other hand, we must not minimize the distinctive characters of the Testaments. The New Testament recognized this. Hebrews, II Corinthians 3, Matt 5:17f and other passages have significant points to make.

We ought to view the testaments in terms of promise and fulfillment, or bud and flower. There is a cohesion of God's work and purposes. There is one promise, one covenant, one people of God - grace and faith are stressed throughout. The doctrine of redemption was essentially the same under the older Testament as it was in the new. "The sacrifices that were brought spoke of the forgiveness of sin on the basis of the atoning blood of Christ, and the oft-repeated washings symbolized the purifying influence of the Holy Spirit. The Tabernacle as a whole was a revelation of the way that led to God and Canaan itself constituted a symbol of the rest that remains for the people of God." (Louis Berkhof, Principles of Biblical Interpretation P. 135.) The true seed of Abraham according to the New Testament are not the physical descendants., but those who share his faith. With the coming of Christ, and fulfillment, the types and symbols pass away before the reality they symbolize. The Old Testament offers the key to the right interpretation of the New. The New Testament is a commentary on the Old. We must neither minimize the Old Testament nor read too much into it. Ramm says: "Although the Old is prior in time the New is prior in method, The New Testament is the capstone of revelation, and God's word through out the supreme instrument of revelation, His Son (Hebr. 1:2). Because it is the final, full and clear revelation of God, it would be foolhardy to make the New revolve around the Old" (Prot. Bibl. Interp. p.167.)

It is here we must consider the concept of the analogy of the faith. "This means, quite simply, that no part of Scripture can be interpreted in such a way as to render it in conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture." (R.C. Sproul, Knowing Scripture, p. 46) A part of "Scripture interpreting Scripture" means that Scripture must be compared with other passages and that the teaching of the whole will not be contradicted by teachings of various parts. '

Where difficulties arise, then the principle of the clarity of Scripture applies: "What is unclear in one part will be clarified somewhere else." We should look to the New Testament to clarify teaching in the Old. We must allow the doctrinal epistles to interpret the gospels, systematic passages (like Romans) to interpret events accounted or narrative passages. Passages clearly "universal" in their application interpret passages with more specific, application. And types and symbols., parables and prophetic passages should be understood in terms of the "didactic" passages.

Implied in the concept of the unity of Scripture is the possibility of summarizing the teaching of the whole into a coherent system of truth (such as a creed) which can be of aid in understanding the meaning of those parts less clear. We ought not to ignore the wisdom and understanding that has come from the work of saints throughout Church history as we "wrestle" with the Word. There is tremendous value in being familiar and using our Westminster Confession of faith and Catechisms to help us tie together what Scripture teaches. Some react against the idea of a doctrinal statement saying "No Creed, but Scripture" but what you may ask of them is the interpretation that is correct?" The Confession and Catechism are not judges to define truth and error in Scripture but subordinate to it, a summary of what the church has found to be its teaching. The Shorter Catechism has been judged one of the best summaries of Bible doctrine ever written.

There is value to in using the studies of men of God who have labored well to draw these things together into systematic form. Calvin's Institutes of The Christian Religion, Louis Berkhof's Manual of Christian Doctrine, A.A. Hodge's Outline of Christian Theology, James Montgomery Boice's Foundation of the Christian Faith, G.I. Williamson's Commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith, -these are helpful in seeing the teaching of Scripture as a whole. I also highly recommend the books of R.C. Sproul.

The Theological Disciplines: definitions:

- **Exegetical Theology** is the discipline concerning with determining the meaning of an individual passage of Scripture.
- **Biblical Theology** is the discipline concerned with seeing how doctrines are progressively developed in the historical unfolding of truth.
- **Systematic Theology** aims at drawing together the Bible's teaching in a systematic way: what it teaches about God, Man., Christi etc.
- **Historical Theology** aims at understand how the church has understood the teachings of Scripture at different times in its history.
- **Apologetical Theology** is concerned with dealing with defending the' faith against past and current philosophical challenges. Apologetics is also is often concerned with the prevention of inroads of non-Christian philosophical systems into Christianity.

Some Cautions:

Beware of too much speculation. Scripture does not speak to every question we may have. Much false doctrine originates in speculating beyond the limits to which the Bible speaks.

Be wary of proof texts! Correctly done it is proper, but each text must be correctly interpreted in its own context. Older Theologians were often guilty of citing a text without doing their "homework". Just because a verse reference is attached does not guarantee the truth of a doctrine. It is the whole teaching of Scripture, not just a verse, that gives "proof" to a doctrinal teaching.

The Bereans were commended because "they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). We ought to search the Scriptures to see if what our Confession and Catechisms teach is so, not to detract from its authority and value, but rather to confirm it.

The Organic unity of Scripture:

"The Word of God is an organic production and consequently the separate books that constitute it are organically related to one another. The Holy Spirit so directed the human authors in writing the books of the Bible that their productions are mutually complementary. They are one in recording the work which God, in the execution of His divine plan, wrought in Christ for the redemption of a people that would glorify him eternally. The Old Testament reveals this work, first of all, historically in the formation and guidance of Israel as a nation. the poetical books and the wisdom literature discloses its fruit in the spiritual experiences and the practical life of God's people. And the prophets view it in the light of God's eternal council, emphasizing the failure of the people to live up to the divine requirements, and directing the hopes of the pious to the future. A similar line of development runs through the New Testament. The Gospels and Acts contain the history of the work of redemption in Christ, The Epistles reveal the effect of this work in the life and experience of the churches. And the Apocalypse discloses its final issue in rays of heavenly light" (Berkhof, Principles of Biblical Interpretation, p. 138, 139)