

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 20, Number 46 November 20, 2005GG

Expository Theology

November 20, 2005GG

Dear Friends,

"It is frighteningly easy in serious Biblical studies to become so focused on the details of a lesson that we never fully examine the context in which it appears. We chase original language definitions and topical works that tend to emphasize these words endlessly. If we find an occasional gem that excites us, we further entrench our fragmented method of study. The incidental appearance of a particular original language word in two separate passages in different books of the Bible does not necessarily enlighten our primary study passage. Consider the English word "trunk." How many meanings does the word have? If I'm driving my automobile and realize that I have a flat tire, I will pull to the side of the road and get the tools and spare tire out of the car's "trunk." If I take my grandchildren to the circus, we might see a very large elephant with a fascinating "trunk." If a person whose native language is non English were to study our experiences and our use of words, following a commonly accepted method of Biblical study, they might attempt to make a major point of the idea that we used the word "trunk" when changing a flat tire and when visiting the circus, errantly concluding that flat tires and elephant trunks are in some strange and mystical way related. More specific to one's Biblical study, the word commonly translated "world" in the New Testament will list at least eight different meanings in a reliable New Testament Greek dictionary. To understand the meaning of the word in a given context requires contextual research, not word chasing in a topical textbook. Can the word have exactly the same meaning in [Joh 3:16](#) where we are told of God's love for the "world" and in [Joh 17:9](#) where Jesus specifically said, ".I pray not for the world"? Do we have in these two passages evidence of a divine rebellion; the Father loving a world that Jesus refuses to so much as pray for? Of course not! We have the same word used in two different ways. How do we determine the meaning of the word in these two passages and-more importantly-the correct meaning of the two passages? We do so by examining the context and developing an interpretation for each that, first of all, renders it compatible with the immediate context of the passage, and that, finally, avoids creating contradiction of ideas in the greater context of all Scripture. While I value the reference books commonly referred to as "systematic theology" texts, I have at times felt rather frustrated at them as well. Most of them provide valuable and consistent development of the various significant doctrines of the Bible. However, they seldom emphasize the integration of the various individual doctrines that they examine. For example, how does redemption relate to atonement? Rather than criticize these texts, which have provided me with an immense and invaluable benefit over the last fifty years of my reading them, my purpose in this project will be to add something of a compliment to them. As we examine specific doctrines, I will attempt to begin with one or two of the most significant passages that present, explain, and develop the particular doctrine under consideration. However, rather than chasing words and multiple passages, I will attempt to develop the doctrine within the primary context being examined. As we develop the doctrine within the selected context, we will look for other doctrines that appear in the context and seek to define the relationship between the various doctrines that appear within this context. Thus, rather than creating an external "systematic" theme, our goal will be to follow the internal "systematic" theme of Scripture that defines both the individual doctrines and other doctrines that relate to them. This task is both formidable and simple. Formidable in that it challenges our minds to submit to the teaching of Scripture and the overarching harmony of all Biblical teachings. Simple in that it will attempt simply and solely to follow the internal structure of Scripture as the various doctrines of Scripture are set forth

as an integrated whole, not as isolated segments of truth. Will you pray for the work as we move forward? God bless, Joe Holder

Expositional Theology

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed. (Lu 1:1-4)

Traditionally theologians use the term "systematic theology" to define their attempts to summarize Biblical theology, particularly the major and essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Most of these works follow a fairly consistent form. Start with God. Develop all the doctrines of the Bible that relate to the Person, character, and work of God. Then shift to the doctrine of man, and eventually bring God and man together in various specific doctrines from election and redemption to eschatology. I have a significant number of these works in my library and have read most of them. They serve an invaluable purpose in that they attempt to treat each doctrine of the faith separately, but I have struggled for years with a personal concern that their value also defines their greatest fault. They tend to sterilize each doctrine, often not fully demonstrating the integration of all Biblical doctrine into a single consistent and harmonious fabric of Biblical truth. Occasionally the thought has crossed my mind, "If these works are systematic, are we saying by implication that the manner in which Scripture presents them is something other than systematic?" I will not criticize these works of the past.

However, as my personal Bible study has increasingly shifted from topical to contextual and expository, my use of systematic theology texts has diminished. At the same time my use of Scripture and specific works that directly enlighten a passage in its full context has moved into the forefront. Much of this transition occurred gradually over several years. Recently a dear friend and fellow in ministry, Elder Mike Ivey, nudged me to consider at least an abbreviated effort to examine the major doctrines of our faith from this contextual-expositional perspective. Rather than developing each doctrine in sterile isolation, examine it from the specific context of the significant passages that present the doctrine in Scripture. While working through the passage to affirm the Biblical teaching on the particular doctrine at hand, look within the context of the passage for parallel development of other doctrines. Seek specific links between the various doctrines. Examine Biblical doctrine, not as an isolated idea, but as an integrated whole. Look for common denominators, ties that unite the various doctrines of the Bible into the underlying "systematic" whole that authors of the various "systematic" theology texts attempt to present in their works. Rather than criticize these works, if I am able to pursue this work, it will attempt to add something of a missing link, the threads that blend each Bible doctrine with other related Biblical truth so that the whole of God's truth is considered in its wholeness, not in its separateness. Is this possible? I believe it is. In fact this interlinked wholeness is precisely the way in which Scripture presents Biblical doctrines. The inspired writers of Scripture never deal with individual doctrines in isolation from the whole fabric of their writing and teaching. They rather present them as an integrated whole truth. This effort should attempt to follow Scripture as it develops and blends each facet of Biblical truth into a single whole. One of my challenges has been to get my mind around the scope of such a work. To be honest, I can't say that I have done so even now, but I believe this approach to God's truth is the Biblical model. How do we go about discovering and affirming theology, the various essential doctrines of God and of God's dealings with humanity? While I readily affirm that Biblical Christianity is historical, and as such is documented in the history of Christianity through the lives and writings of various men, historical research alone cannot determine sound theological truth. Why? Not only does history document the historicity of Christian truth, it also records an endless maze of errors and nuances of mixed truth and error. I may reach a conclusion about a particular Bible doctrine that is not fully orthodox within my denomination or fellowship. If I invest sufficient time in

reading from past Christian writers, eventually I will discover someone who held to the same view that I now hold, so I can say that my view is "what the old fathers in the faith" believed, even if it is errant or for that matter heretical. We discover and affirm sound Biblical theology by sound, thoroughgoing Biblical study and research, not by history and the myriad of ad hominem arguments (appeal to a man; if this respected man in the past believed a certain thing, shame on us if we do not believe the same thing that he believed.) that typically go with the unholy marriage of history and theology. Ad hominem appeals are the weakest arguments in a sound pursuit of Biblical doctrine, for, regardless of the deficit in our personal beliefs, we can readily find someone in the past who believed as we do. Logically it is almost impossible to appeal to the authoritative writings of respected historical men without falling into the ad hominem trap. Neither personal belief nor the belief of men in the past, regardless of their respected place in history, validates soundness. Agreement with Scripture alone affirms sound theology. Luke's introduction to his gospel affirms what most serious Bible students eventually discover. Scripture develops Biblical doctrines in logical and soundly reasoned form. They "set forth in order" what we most surely believe. Given the breadth and gravity of this approach to Biblical doctrine, I have agreed to pursue this task with Mike's ongoing input, as well as yours. The work is necessarily defined by our choice of doctrines and the supporting passages that we select to develop them, along with their integration with other related doctrines that appear in the context of Scripture. I must appeal to your patience and your prayerful support as we begin to explore the major doctrines of the faith from this perspective. On one hand it should be simple, for my objective is to develop the doctrine in the same precise manner as Scripture develops it. On the other hand the task is incredibly intimidating. My typical objective in writing on Biblical teaching has been to follow the "KISS" principle, Keep it short and simple. I ask your prayers for God's grace to clarify both the selected doctrines and the specific passages that I choose to develop them, along with the internal blend of the doctrine considered with other related Biblical doctrines. Pray that I will faithfully recognize and follow the clear order of the passage so that we will jointly see the truth of the doctrine, as well as its seamless integration with other Biblical doctrines. Despite the daunting challenge, the value of this approach to fundamental Biblical doctrines appears in its attempt to follow the systematic pattern of integrated truth in which Scripture presents them to us. All Biblical doctrine appears as integrated patterns woven into a single fabric of Biblical truth. Scripture knows nothing of "doctrine" versus "practice." The most profound of doctrines may appear side by side with the most basic practical instruction that is designed to guide the Christian in daily living according to Biblical teaching. In Scripture there is no wall between "doctrine" and "practice," or for that matter between any of the various teachings that Scripture brings to light on its holy pages. Predestination and discipleship are not isolated chapters in Scripture, nor does Scripture confuse one with the other. While defining each with clarity, Scripture brings the harmony of the two together so that neither God's eternal purpose nor our solemn obligation to obey God is confused. God works in us to do, according to Paul, but God does not "do the doing" of our obedience, the regrettable fault of teachings that tend toward determinism or fatalism. Pray for the work. I need your prayers. If you find the idea exciting and have specific doctrines and/or passages that especially command your interest, please communicate them to me. Together let's "buckle up" and see where God leads us in this effort.

Elder Joe Holder