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Q&A#157 What is the Centre of Biblical Theology?

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Today's question: "What do you believe to be the centre of Biblical Theology? I've seen that there are many different ideas, what's yours?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what do you believe to be the centre of Biblical Theology? I've seen that there are many different ideas. What's yours? I don't think that this is a very helpful way of thinking about Biblical Theology, and I've tried to avoid it, although it does have popularity in certain parts.

I would start off by asking what exactly is meant by centre, because centre can mean a great many different things, and within these conversations, it's not entirely clear that centre is the best word for what is being described. Often what's being spoken of is a certain vantage point, perhaps, some vantage point from which the whole comes into view in a very powerful way. For some, it's a master principle.

Others would see it as the material principle, or the core doctrine, the central reality in that sense, this doctrine upon which maybe the church stands or falls, other things being

peripheral and things we can disagree about. Some would say it's the centre in terms of this ground upon which all Christians agree. It's mere Biblical Theology in that sense.

It's something that's common to Christians, that we all see this at the very heart. It's not something that is a matter of great dispute. There's ecumenical, Catholic agreement upon the subject.

For others, it might be a unifying narrative theme. You go throughout the Bible, and you'll see this theme playing out in various iterations and forms, but all fundamentally variations upon this single unifying narrative theme. For others, it's an overarching form that when you stand back and you see the grand portrait, this is what it is a portrait of.

For others, it might be a governing criterion, that this is what counts as Biblical Theology, true Biblical Theology, and what doesn't. It's all tested by this principle. For others, it's maybe a summation of the entirety of its truth, that when you boil it down, this is what it can finally be distilled as.

The entirety of Biblical truth can be summed up in this particular statement, and then maybe you can use that statement to test what really counts as Biblical truth or not. That's the way it applies for some people. It can be a Procrustean bed that you lop off certain parts of scripture that don't fit into your system.

For others, it's a single goal that everything is aiming towards. You read the entire Biblical narrative, and it's all pushing towards this final point. For others, it's some sort of hermeneutical key on a more, I don't know, some more interpretative level, exegetical level.

For others, it's a sort of center of gravity that when you distribute the weight of all Biblical doctrines equally, appropriately, you'll find it tends to balance upon this particular point. That doesn't mean it's the most important or weighty part of the Biblical doctrine. It just means this is where things tend to, the weight tends to find its rest.

At other points, it might be the thing that everything kind of leads around to in the end. All roads lead to this particular doctrine. For others, it's you peel away all the doctrines and levels of Biblical truth, and at the heart, in the very core, you find this mystery.

This mystery is that center of Biblical theology. Perhaps it's the doctrine of the Trinity, perhaps, that that is the thing that holds it all together. Now, many different proposals have been put forward for what is the center of Biblical theology, and they fall into different ones of these categories.

They're not all thinking about the center in the same way. For many, it's not so much a center as a vantage point that takes everything into, comprehends the whole. For some, it's covenant.

Others, salvation through judgment. For others, the glory of God. For others, it might be grace and faith.

For some others, it might be kingdom or trinity or God dwelling with his people. Or many people speak about being Christ-centered or gospel-centered or talking about divinization and theosis, that that's the end of it all. That's the purpose to which it is all working.

Now, these approaches have different merit. There are many of these approaches that will be quite rewarding as you look at the entirety of the Biblical text from that vantage point, as you see the way that overarching or unifying themes can hold things together so we're not just dealing with disparate texts, but something that has a unity and a coherence. Many of those themes will help you in that.

But if you're depending upon just one of those themes as a master principle or whatever it is, you will find that you, or you probably won't find, but you will be missing a lot of the Biblical witness. There will be many things that are obscured from your vision because you're concentrating on just one aspect of the text. No matter how important that aspect is, it's only one aspect.

So my ideal has been to explore many of these different approaches at once and to explore them in a context where I'm constantly engaging in close, attentive, empirical work with the text. And so attentiveness to the actual empirical shape and character of the text is the most important thing. Your system, your structure, your patterns, your principles, whatever they are, they should emerge from actual close examination of the text itself.

And they should always be brought back to the text to be tested. And at certain points you'll want to hone them, at other points you'll want to jettison them, but they're in service of the text. And if you are trying to build a system, which is what often Biblical theology is at risk of becoming, it's at risk of treating the Biblical text as providing the materials, raw materials, with which we can build some system of Biblical theology.

This edifice, this structure. And in working with that structure we can end up trying to create a centre and the architectonic structure of this new edifice that we're constructing, where we want to see the distribution of weight, etc. That is often a very unhelpful task when it comes to understanding Scripture well.

Because the system often gets brought to the text in a way that will efface the text. It's a system or some, for some it's a hermeneutical principle, some principle that unlocks the text, some covenant model or something like that. Or some structure, some Biblical key, whatever it is.

It's something that can be very, do a lot of violence to our actual reading of the text. It

can prevent us from noticing what the text itself is saying, because we're constantly bringing this principle and trying to force the text into the principle. Because we've decided, maybe after a lot of examination of the text and seeing some things that are genuinely there, that this is the central principle.

And once we've done that, we can be prevented from seeing other things that would challenge that, present its limitations, whatever it is. And often that desire for one unifying or one single vantage point from which everything comes into view is a failure to recognise our creatureliness, the need to walk around things. When we view things more generally in our lives, we have to negotiate them.

We have to walk around them. We have to view them from many different angles and see many different facets of them, until we come to an understanding of them as a three-dimensional object. If we're constantly viewing the scripture from one particular dimension in terms of one system, one structure, whatever it is, we will find it very difficult to see many aspects of it.

And so I see all those sorts of systems as having a sort of heuristic value. They enable us to find things out. They enable us, you try on a structure like that for size, and at certain points you'll jettison it.

You'll find it's not particularly helpful in understanding a particular passage. But you try to emphasise, you're not going to put that much weight on it. It's not something that is the most important thing to get.

The most important thing is to have, ideally, a close attentiveness to the text from which an understanding of themes emerges. Now what you'll find when those themes emerge is that there will be many of them that you're seeing simultaneously, or many of them you're seeing over a period of time. Now, since we are creatures and we're limited in our understanding, we probably won't be seeing these things simultaneously.

What we'll do is move from one vantage point to another and constantly re-examine the same text from different vantage points in terms of different themes, in terms of different connections. That's what I'm doing all the time. I find that when I return to a text I'll notice all sorts of things that I hadn't seen there before, simply because I'm looking at it from a different vantage point in terms of different overarching themes, whatever it is.

Now that doesn't mean that the themes I saw previously weren't there. It just means that I was seeing part of the picture, not all of it. And so what I find is, for myself, the central principle of biblical theology, there isn't one.

But what there is, is whatever I'm thinking about primarily at that time, the vantage point that is really shaping my view. And that is going to last for a little while, and then

I'll move around to another vantage point. I'll see what covenant has to say about the text.

I'll see what kingdom has to say about the text. I'll see where the doctrine of the trinity sheds light upon the text, whatever it is. I find, for instance, that as I'm looking through a particular series of topics, those will dominate my particular avenues of approach to the biblical text.

So for instance, at the moment, I'm thinking very much about the word becoming flesh, and the way that God's revelation takes many different forms in history, and all finally work towards an incarnational aim, as Christ is God in the flesh, and as human beings in the body of Christ, take the text into their flesh, into their bodies, into their lives, and there's an internalization of the word. So I've been thinking about that a lot recently, and I find that just about any part of scripture I go to, it's there in some form, and it's very helpful. It really unlocks certain things.

But it's not the only key, it's not the only mystery that we find at the heart of the text. It's just one of many, and it's one that is particularly illuminating at certain sections. You'll find that there'll be parts of scripture that are really opened up by certain principles, and then other principles just don't have the same purchase.

Whereas if you take those principles to other parts of scripture, the degree to which they are effective will be reversed, and that's common experience in my life, I've often seen that. At certain points you'll take a principle to a text, and it just opens up. I find, for instance, the principle of the internalization of the word, and all the things that are involved with that coming to maturity, the development of internalized freedom, the movement from law to wisdom to prophecy, all these sorts of things come together, and the movement towards incarnation, I find is a great way to hold together certain themes.

And as I'm exploring that, I'm always recognizing that this is just one limited vantage point. Certain things are coming to light, but I need to explore many different vantage points alongside that. Now, as I explore that vantage point, I'll want to share that vantage point with others, but I'll often present it as if it were the only thing, because it's the thing that's occupying my attention solely at that time.

But it's definitely not, and I think hopefully if you follow me for any period of time, you'll see that I'm using many different principles, many different vantage points, many different structures, whatever it is, to try and get some sort of perspective upon the biblical text. Seeing it from many different angles, understanding many different internal structures that vary from biblical text to biblical text. And as I do that, I think I have a far better understanding of the text than I would do were I focusing upon one central thing to rule everything else.

And so I'd advise against that search for the center of biblical theology. I don't believe

there is one. What I believe you'll be far better off doing is paying closer attention, trying to see what structures emerge from the text itself, trying on many different structures and principles and themes for size and seeing what emerges, without putting that much weight upon any single one.

Because you'll find there are many pet theories you have that you want to bring to the text, and you want the text to fit into to confirm your theory. But in many ways, the best treatment of the biblical text is one that has a great number of these different principles and theories and abilities to see many different patterns in the text, but also this ability to be ruthless with them, to cut out principles that don't work, that are casting things into shadow when they should be illuminating them. Just be merciless with some of your principles and some of your structures and systems, and be prepared to jettison them if they're not working.

These principles are designed to serve the text, not to be served by the text. Anyway, I hope this helps. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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Thank you very much for listening. God bless.