

# SYMPHONIC THEOLOGY

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## CHAPTER 3: EXAMPLES OF USEFUL BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

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In chapter 3 I discussed three perspectives that can be used in reading a passage of the Bible: the ethical, the devotional, and the doctrinal. But we can use many other perspectives. Since it is valuable to use several different perspectives in the study of a passage, it is to our advantage to expand our list. In doing so, we have no guarantee that every perspective we propose will be equally useful. In fact, perspectives developed outside of a Christian world view may be actually destructive in the hands of their users. It is certainly possible to read the Bible looking only for what agrees with preestablished conceptions. Within the Christian world view, however, the use of a multiplicity of perspectives is one protection against our tendency to read the Bible only in terms of a preestablished single perspective.

So we are looking for perspectives in harmony with the Christian world view. But still not everything will be equally useful in every case. Some narrative passages do not yield very much direct doctrine; some prophecies of the future do not yield very much direct ethics. Yet if we have a large number of possible perspectives to use, we are likely to find fruit. In many respects the most fruitful perspectives are the dominant themes and analogies developed extensively within the Bible itself. If we use these frameworks, we are bound to turn up unsuspected connections and insights.

## BOOK THEMES

Any prominent theme within a book of the Bible can be used fruitfully as a perspective on the whole book. For example, consider the story of the healing of the blind man (Luke 18:35-43) in the context of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Luke-Acts has a number of distinctive themes. Like the other gospels, Luke presents Jesus as the Messiah who has come to save his people in fulfillment of the Old Testament. The theme of fulfillment is prominent in Luke, particularly the fulfillment of the Year of Jubilee (see Luke 4:16-30). Luke also has the themes of salvation to the poor and despised and salvation to the Gentiles. When we look at Luke 18:35-43 through the perspectives offered by

these themes, we sometimes receive new insights. For example, we may look at the passage, asking how it reflects the theme of fulfillment. Jesus' healing of the blind is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies of opening the eyes of the blind (Isa. 29:18; 35:5; 42:7). Through the perspective of the Jubilee, we see that it is also a fulfillment of the purpose of release from bondage symbolized by the Year of Jubilee (Luke 4:18). Through the perspective of salvation to the despised, we are reminded of the fact that handicapped people were in many respects second-class citizens in Jewish society. It was often thought that sickness was a sign of sin (John 9:2). In the case of this blind man, the crowd thought that he was a nuisance and was not worth Jesus' attention. But Jesus, consistent with his purposes of bringing salvation everywhere, had mercy on someone whom other people overlooked.

How far do we go with this type of observation? There is a danger that we will indulge our imaginations and attribute too much meaning to a passage. But I think that often we do not give the Bible enough credit. Once a book has exhibited a clear-cut theme, the book invites us to see all its contents as somehow fitting in with the theme, sometimes loosely and indirectly, sometimes directly. Luke does not have to tell us every time that a miracle occurs, "Now this event is a fulfillment of the Old Testament." It ought to be enough for Luke to introduce the theme of fulfillment and then indicate once or twice a connection between fulfillment and miracles (Luke 4:16-30 and 7:20-23).

## **IMPORTANT THEMES USED IN THE WHOLE BIBLE**

Some themes and subjects are so important in the Bible as a whole that they appear repeatedly. Such themes can clearly be used as perspectives on any passage of the Bible that we are studying. Of any passage we can ask what it says about God, about human beings, about sin, or about Christ as the mediator between God and human beings.

Some recurrent patterns in the Bible are not quite so obvious but are nevertheless important. The covenants between God and human beings are one such pattern. God establishes covenants with Abraham, with Israel through Moses, with David, and with the church through Christ. Even when the word "covenant" is not explicitly mentioned, we can often see patterns reminiscent of the promises and responsibilities involved in explicit covenants. A pattern of promise, command, human obedience or disobedience, and reward or punishment occurs all through the Bible. If we wish, we can use "covenant" in an expanded way to cover all these instances. The word was actually used in this way in the development of covenant theology, which sees all of God's relations with human beings in terms of the perspective of covenant.(1)

Another recurrent theme is the idea of the temple. The temple built by Solomon is one manifestation of the principle that God dwells with his people. But clearly God is with Abraham before there is any fixed temple structure, and he promises to be a sanctuary (temple) to the exiles after Solomon's temple is destroyed (Ezek. 11:16). The whole theme of "Immanuel," God with us, may be seen as the broader theme of which the temple is a special case.

There are other themes of the same kind: the holy land, the offspring of the woman and the offspring of Abraham, God as a warrior, God as king, theophany and glory. Some themes occur naturally in historical patterns: promise and fulfillment; sin, suffering, and glory. Fulfillment as well as suffering and glory are clearly important in the Gospels, in particular the Gospel of Luke (24:25-27, 44-47).

## **Expandable biblical Perspectives: The Ten Commandments**

We have already indicated that we can expand a perspective until it encompasses the whole of the Bible or even the whole of life. With imagination, we can expand many of the themes or perspectives that the Bible offers us. Each of the ten commandments, for example, may be expanded to cover the whole of our responsibilities to God. (2) I illustrate this expansion here with five of the commandments.

The commandment "You shall not commit adultery" is our first example. In its most specific meaning, it forbids sexual intercourse with someone else's spouse. But when we view it in the larger context of Old Testament law, we can say that it articulates or exemplifies a principle of chastity that has broader implications. We can see that God calls on us to respect the marriage bond and his design that sexual fulfillment take place within this bond. The principle of sexual purity has implications for the way we raise children to prepare them later for marriage. It has implications for engaged couples and implications for lust (Matt. 5:27-30). Moreover, God's people have a relation to God, parallel to a marriage relation (Hosea, Ezekiel 16, etc.). Hence, violation of our exclusive loyalty to God is spiritual adultery. In the last analysis, any sin against God is spiritual adultery. Hence the commandment not to commit adultery can be viewed as a perspective on the entirety of human ethical life.

When looking at these broader implications, we must not ignore the fact that the seventh commandment has a specific focus. It does not mean anything and everything, but it means something quite specific, namely, the forbidding of adultery. When we look at the context of this commandment in the whole Bible, we can see the legitimacy of stretching the commandment into a perspective on everything. But we never ought to eliminate the specific focus with which we started. Our exercises in expanding the perspective help us to see the holistic

character of our ethical life. They help to remind us that everywhere we stand before our holy and gracious God and that the obedience that he demands is not merely piecemeal and not arbitrary. At the same time, exercises in expansion ought never to be an excuse for overlooking, dismissing, or reinterpreting the obvious.

Next, consider the commandment "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." In its most explicit thrust, this commandment forbids false testimony in court. But it has implications for broader issues of telling the truth. We are to exercise care and be zealous to protect the reputation of others. If we are a servant of God, all our actions are explicit or implicit testimonies about the God whom we claim to serve. Any sin is a bad witness or a false testimony against God, within the "courtroom" formed by the universe and the angels (see 1 Tim. 5:21).

The commandment to honor our father and mother applies most explicitly to relations within the nuclear family. Viewed as an expression of a broader principle, however, it has implications for our relation to all those in authority (see 1 Pet. 2:13-21). Officers of the government and leaders in the church both have authority delegated from God, analogous to the authority of parents. Hence we are bound to honor them (1 Pet. 2:13, 17; Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13, 1 Tim. 5:1). Furthermore, God is our spiritual Father (Mal. 1:6, Heb. 12:7-11). We must honor him. Any sin dishonors our heavenly Father. Any act of righteousness is an act honoring him, an act obeying the fifth commandment. In this way, the fifth commandment can be viewed as a perspective on the entirety of our life.

Next, consider the commandment not to commit murder. Jesus points out that all sinful anger is a covert form of murder (Matt. 5:21-22). And all sin is a form of anger against God, nothing less than an attempt to destroy God as God.

Finally, consider the Sabbath commandment. Since this commandment is very specific and since at least some of the forms associated with it in Mosaic times were ceremonial and temporary, it is more difficult to expand it into a perspective on everything. Yet we can do so. The Sabbath commandment is not arbitrary or whimsical. It was meant to say something to Israelites about their service to God. As a clue to its deeper significance, note that the Sabbath is a holy day, a day particularly set apart for special acts of devotion to God. It is also a sign pointing forward to the time of final rest in the consummation of all things (Hebrews 4). Of course the commandment had a specific focus, namely, to rest from one's works on the seventh day. But broadly, it was also an intensified form of the principle that all of life is to be devoted and consecrated to God (Rom. 12:1-2). The special seventh-day rest is a way of expressing this principle with a dramatic intensity. The Sabbath also expresses the idea of living in the light of our hope for a final rest, celebrating the goodness of God, and honoring God in expectation of fulfilling his promises of rest. All of our life is to be an expanding

embodiment of these principles, and any sin is a breaking of this devotion to God.

## **STANDARD, GOAL AND ATTITUDE AS PERSPECTIVES ON ETHICS**

It follows, then, that we can look at the whole field of ethics from the perspective of any one of the Ten Commandments. But there are still other ways of developing perspectives on ethics. One approach is to ask what rules and standards govern human conduct. This perspective starts with standards, or norms. The Christian answer is that the norms for human conduct are to be found in the commandments of God. Our ethical answers should always be derived from reflecting on the implications of God's commandments. We may sometimes find ourselves in situations in which it is difficult to see the correct implications of the commandments. But in principle it is sufficient for us to keep God's commandments: the person who does so is "blameless" (Ps. 119:1). Hence we may say that the norms cover all of ethics.(3)

Another route to ethics starts with the goal of Christian living. The goal of Christians is to do all for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). In the context of this verse, Paul tells us to do everything in such a way that other people, as well as ourself, honor and praise God more thoroughly. Paul is counseling certain Corinthians who woodenly appealed to a theological principle or norm. They knew that all foods are from God (1 Cor. 10:26), and they therefore argued that they could eat whatever they wanted, ignoring whether the food had previously been sacrificed to an idol or whether other people were offended. But Paul points out that these Corinthians have to pay attention to their circumstances. They must think about and be concerned for the people who might be offended by what they do. The Corinthians must so act within their own circumstances that the honor and praise of God will be promoted. We might almost call this approach to ethics "situational," "utilitarian," or "pragmatic," since Paul is saying that we must pay attention to what is useful, to what helps our situation, to what promotes God's glory in practice.

Whereas the perspective on standards started with norms, this situational perspective starts with the question of what actions will help our situation. This perspective covers the whole field, just as much as the normative one does. If we genuinely promote the honor and praise of God in whatever we do, God is pleased.

But we must note carefully the relation between the normative and the situational approaches. Unlike in secular ethics or modern so-called situation ethics, there is to be no tension between norms and situation. God gave us the norms, and he creates the situations. He is the same God. Moreover, a proper understanding of God's norms is not the wooden understanding that some of the Corinthians had.

God's commandment "love your neighbor as yourself" is a real commandment, a norm, a standard. At the same time, it specifically directs us to pay attention to our neighbors and their situations. Similarly, Paul gives norms to the Corinthians that tell them to take into account what other people think about what they are doing. The norms themselves tell us to pay attention to the situation.

Conversely, we can evaluate our situation properly only by using God's norms. A genuine concern to promote the honor and praise of God (the situational approach) is the very opposite of modern situation ethics. How can we honor God if we do not listen to him and do what he says? God himself is, in a real sense, always the most important person in our situation! In addition, how can one tell for sure what the long-range consequences of an action will be? Only God knows all results, including the consequences at the judgment seat of Christ. So we must listen to God's wisdom rather than try to argue independently that some action contrary to his norms will nevertheless turn out well on a given occasion.

A third approach to ethics is the attitudinal perspective. In this perspective, we evaluate human actions in terms of the attitudes and motives of the person doing the action. Clearly this starting point is important. Jesus locates the root of sins in the human heart and the attitudes of the heart (Matt. 15:19-20). Anger is already the essence of murder, and lust is already adultery (Matt. 5:21-30). Moreover, we can expand this orientation to cover all of life. We may feel sincere, but our attitude is not really right if we do not have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), if our minds are not transformed to know the will of God (Rom. 12:1-2), if we do not have the law written in our heart (Heb. 10:16; cf. 2 Cor. 3:3-6). In other words, the attitude of loving God and loving our neighbor is genuine love (rather than sentimentality) only if we keep Jesus' commandments (John 14:15, 23). The right attitude, in an expanded sense, must include all the norms. And of course it must take into account the situation. I may say that I love my neighbors, but I really do not if I pay no attention to their needs (James 2:16, 1 John 3:16-18).

We now have perspectives on ethics starting with standard, goal, and attitude, as well as perspectives starting with each of the Ten Commandments. Each perspective is obtained by expanding on an emphasis and a focus embodied in Scripture. In each case this focus becomes the starting point for a perspective on the whole field of ethics. We may summarize the overall properties of these perspectives as follows:

1. Each perspective has a separate focus of interest.
2. Each perspective is in the end dependent on the others and intelligible only in the context of the others.
3. Each perspective is, in principle, harmonizable with the others.

4. Any one perspective, when expanded far enough, involves the and in fact encompasses the others. Each can be viewed as an aspect of the others.
5. Because of the tendency to human oversight or one-sided emphasis, each perspective is useful in helping us to notice facts and relationships that tend to be further in the background in the other perspectives.

The perspectives are like facets of a jewel. The whole jewel--the whole of ethics--can be seen through any *one* of the facets, if we look carefully enough. But not everything can be seen equally easily through only one facet.

## **THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD AS PERSPECTIVES**

Now let us take a different subject for expansion: the attributes or perfections of God. God is righteous, holy, loving, all-knowing, sovereign, and so on. These attributes can be used as perspectives for understanding better everything that God reveals about himself. Consider, for instance, the righteousness of God. When we say that God is righteous, we do not mean exactly the same thing that we mean when we say that he is loving. The two words are not synonymous. Using the word "righteous," we encourage people to relate what the Bible reveals of God to their knowledge of righteousness among human beings. But what we know about righteousness can also be used as a perspective. In all God's actions, God acts as the righteous God. His love is not weakness or mere fondness but is a righteous love. His sovereign rule over the universe is not an arbitrary exercise of power but a righteous rule. His knowledge is righteous knowledge, not simply factual correctness. In knowing things, God knows them with a righteous attitude and righteous evaluation of their value and worth.

On a human level, to be "righteous" means to conform to a rule, a standard regulating human persons and human behavior. For God, it ultimately involves God's conformity to a standard too. But the standard is not something outside God or above God (then the standard itself would be the real "god"). For God, the standard is simply the fitness of his being the way he is. Note that we are here expanding "righteousness" beyond its traditional associations and talking about fitness. In so doing, we can go on to make connections with other attributes, or perfections, of God.

For example, it is fit, or righteous, for God to know all things, since he is the standard for all values and truth. It is fit for God to be holy, to be separated from and revered by his creatures. It is fit that God, the supremely wise one, is also the creator and ruler, and that he exercises all power. Thus righteousness (or fitness) could be viewed as a primary attribute of God, from which other attributes are derived.

Such ways of speaking, of course, can lead to incorrect deductions about God, in which we might use a distorted human conception of righteousness or fitness.

We might wrongly claim that those deductions gave us more ultimate insight than biblical statements about God's other attributes. Furthermore, we might neglect to observe that other attributes of God can *also* be used as a starting point, in the same way that righteousness is used.

The attributes of God can thus be used as perspectives for our understanding of God. But in addition we can use them as perspectives on human beings, since human beings are created in the image of God. Traditionally, theologians have distinguished between so-called communicable and incommunicable attributes of God and have applied only the former to human beings. But such a distinction depends on how narrowly we define an attribute or how narrow our conception is. God is omniscient and human beings are not. Hence, God's omniscience is said to be incommunicable. But human beings do know things, which is a point of similarity or analogy. This analogy can serve as a starting point for building a perspective that relates all human knowledge to its divine archetype. We may develop similarly the other attributes of God. We can even use attributes as perspectives on everything in creation, since creation is created and superintended by God, who is righteous, holy, loving, omnipresent, and so on. His ways with the world will be consistent with who he is.

## **GOD AS A BIBLICAL THEME**

We have now surveyed a considerable number of biblical themes, each of which can be expanded into a perspective on the whole Bible. We could extend our list by developing still other themes. But the examples that we have developed are among the more prominent themes in the Bible, and they are sufficient to give readers an idea of what it would be like to take some other theme and expand it into a perspective.

Before leaving this topic, we may state the obvious: in many ways the most important and central theme of the Bible is God himself. God is, moreover, the trinitarian God--the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Hence we could speak of three closely intertwined themes as well as one theme.

In discussing other subjects, the Bible constantly connects them, implicitly and explicitly, to its teaching about God. And the Bible is not only a book about God, it is a book written by God, a book that is God's speech, hence a book through which we meet and commune with God. Reflecting on what each passage contributes and implies about our communion with God is clearly fruitful.

As a trinitarian book, the Bible also has Christ as its center. The whole the revelation of God comes to its climax and fulfillment in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, his session at God's right hand, and his coming again to judge and to reign. Luke 24:44-47, Hebrews, and Matthew are particularly emphatic about the fact that Christ is the center of the Bible. He fulfills the promises and revelation of God in the Old Testament. Luke 24:45 implies that it

is fruitful to look at each passage in terms of what it reveals of Christ. We need not practice any artificiality, such as introducing an allegorical meaning on an unpromising Old Testament text in order to force Christ into the text.

For several reasons, no artificiality is needed. Christ is the Word of God and is God. He speaks wherever God speaks in the Old Testament. Furthermore, key Old Testament human figures often perform functions that anticipate the coming of Christ in his human nature. Sometimes even their failures point to the need for a perfect successor. David failed in his sin with Bathsheba, and Solomon failed by following the idolatrous ways of his foreign wives (1 Kings 11). Those sins and the subsequent decline in Solomon's descendants showed the necessity of a perfect human (and divine) king to come in the descent of David (see, e.g., Isa. 9:6-7).

## **PROPHETS, KINGS, AND PRIESTS**

We should, then, notice the role that Old Testament prophets, kings, and priests have in foreshadowing the coming of Christ. Each of the three main offices can be expanded into a perspective on the way in which Christ mediates the presence of God to human beings. The mediation took place in the Old Testament largely by way of foreshadowings of Christ, and takes place in the New Testament in terms of the effects of his completed work on earth.

Traditional systematic and confessional theology has drawn attention to the themes of prophet, king, and priest and their fulfillment in Christ. At this point I only sketch the main lines of connection. The Old Testament prophets represented God to the people by announcing and bringing God's word to them. Christ now declares the word of God to us in climactic form (Heb. 1:1-2). The kings (and judges) of Israel had the responsibility to lead the people in war and to rule them according to God's law (Deuteronomy 17). When they acted righteously, they brought God's rule to bear on the people, both in just statutes and in deliverance in war. Even when they acted unrighteously, they showed the necessity of the coming righteous king. Christ is now the final king who rules forever in the line of David (Heb. 1:2, 8). The priests offered sacrifice on behalf of the people and thus mediated God's presence and blessing to the people. Christ offers his own body as the final sacrifice (Heb. 1:3) and gives the blessing of eternal life and mutual indwelling (John 14:20; 17:21-23, etc.).

The Old Testament officers had distinct functions. Prophets, kings, and priests did not all do the same thing. So how can any one office be expanded into a perspective on the whole? We find the answer by reflecting on the ministry of Jesus Christ during his earthly life. Some of Christ's acts we can immediately associate with the office of the Old Testament prophet. Christ taught the people and preached to them, and in this way filled a prophetic role. He worked miracles as acts of power, demonstrating kingly authority. In his sacrificial death he functioned like a priest.

Upon reflection, however, we can see that each of the roles can be used as perspectives on the *whole* of Christ's life. We cannot ultimately isolate one piece from another. Christ's prophetic proclamation of the kingdom of God in words goes together with and reinforces his kingly demonstration of the presence of the kingdom of God by casting out demons and working miracles. His words have power and authority, unlike the scribes (Mark 1:22). We may say that Christ's words possess the authority of the prophetic word. But we can equally say that the word he speaks to cast out demons (Mark 1:27) is an exercise of the power of the *kingdom* of God (Luke 11:17-20).

Jesus' miracles, we have noted, clearly represent God's kingship. They are not arbitrary in character but are signs (John 2:11) that illuminate the character of his mission as a whole. Many of them are parallel to miracles that Old Testament prophets performed and thus authenticate Jesus as the final prophet. The miracles are most often signs of salvation and reconciliation and hence point forward to the great work of reconciliation on the cross. They thus covertly prophesy the significance of Jesus' whole ministry, climaxing in his death and resurrection. Since, moreover, Jesus' death and resurrection are substitutionary sacrifices, priestly in character, the prophetic anticipations of his death and resurrection, both in his teaching and his miracles, also have a priestly character. He proclaims forgiveness of sins (Luke 5:20-24; 7:48), an act closely related to the priestly concern with expiation.

We clearly have, then, justification for expanding the idea of the prophetic, the kingly, and the priestly. All communication of God's word to people is, in an expanded sense, prophetic. Even communicative actions such as miracles are prophetic in this sense. Similarly, we can say that all exercise of rule over people on God's behalf is kingly. Since words are one way of establishing God's rule and acts of reconciliation are another, they are all kingly. Finally, we may expand our idea of priestly to cover all acts enhancing communion with God. All of Christ's ministry can then be said to be priestly. With these expanded senses of prophetic, kingly, and priestly, we could reread our Bibles and find much that related directly or sometimes only distantly to the central and climactic work of Jesus Christ.

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## Footnotes

1. I basically agree with historical covenant theology. Whether or not one agrees, however, one may still acknowledge that historical covenant theology achieved some important insights by the use of the covenant theme. Although the covenant perspective is useful, its proponents may still overlook something in the Bible. Similarly, dispensationalism emphasizes dispensations (distinctive epochs in God's rule) and the distinctive role in history played by the Jewish people.

Those perspectives are stimulating, whether or not dispensationalists are correct about the details.

2. I owe this insight, along with some of the examples in this chapter, to John M. Frame. See his unpublished classroom syllabus, "The Doctrine of the Christian Life," (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1979).

3. Some Christians think that we are sometimes confronted with "tragic moral choice," a situation in which a Christian may have to disobey one commandment in order to keep another. I agree that sometimes our situations present difficulties. But it is never necessary to break a commandment of God. I think the solution comes partly in seeing that the commandments in the Bible are not abstract rules isolated from the rest of the Bible, but are what God says in the context of everything else in the Bible. The context of the Bible sometimes indicates that there are qualifications or exceptions to a rule that is superficially thought to be universal. Jesus argues in this way in his discussion of David's "violation" of the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28). Jesus appeals to a more basic principle in the Bible (v. 27), which was intended to guide our human understanding and application of the Sabbath law.