A man in a dark suit and red tie stands against a cloudy sky and ocean background. His face is replaced by an open book. The book's pages are visible, showing text. The man is wearing a dark bowler hat. The overall scene is a surreal representation of a scholar or theologian.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?

A GUIDE TO THE BIBLE'S STORY,
SYMBOLISM, AND PATTERNS

JAMES M.
HAMILTON JR.

“What Is Biblical Theology?” confirms Jim Hamilton’s reputation as a top-shelf thinker and a wickedly good writer. This slim volume builds on the presupposition that the capacious biblical narrative—sixty-six books written by numerous authors and including stories, poems, proverbs, letters, and apocalypses—possesses a deep inner unity. Its unity arises from its divine inspiration, and it is in fact the true story of the whole world. Hamilton teaches his readers to engage in biblical theology, allowing the biblical story to shape us and conform us to God’s will.”

Bruce Riley Ashford, Provost, Dean of Faculty, and
Associate Professor of Theology and Culture, Southeastern Baptist
Theological Seminary

“Theology is a word that comes with baggage. Most people, like me, find their brains shutting down a little at its mention, mainly because it stirs up the same sort of feelings as words like *calculus* and *dentist appointment*. But from the outset of this book James Hamilton assures us he’s not performing mental acrobatics (though I’m sure he could if he wanted to). Rather, he’s showing us that if the Bible is a story, and God is a storyteller, then biblical theology is less like math and more like literature; it’s less like a cold study of the chemical properties of paint and more like gazing at a Van Gogh. This is a book I wish I could have read a long time ago.”

Andrew Peterson, singer/songwriter; author, *The Wingfeather Saga*

“This short, accessible book shows how we can move away from making the Bible all about us, reducing it to just another self-help book. Anyone who reads *What Is Biblical Theology?* will begin to discover what the Bible is really about and will have more ‘Now I get it!’ experiences as it equips readers to trace the thematic threads and story-line resolutions of the Bible from beginning to end.”

Nancy Guthrie, author, Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament Bible study series

“Disoriented Bible reading leads to disoriented living. Too often the Bible reader parachutes into a passage without understanding the immediate context or the overarching context of the entire Bible. Getting oriented to the whole story of the Bible is the only way to right interpretation and right living. Gaining this whole-Bible interpretive perspective is the burden of biblical theology, and Jim Hamilton has given us an outstanding introduction to this important yet neglected discipline. If the interpretive approach of Hamilton’s book is applied, the reader will be able to better understand God’s Word, know the mind of Christ, and glorify God.”

K. Erik Thoennes, Professor of Theology, Chair, Talbot School of
Theology, Biola University; Pastor, Grace Evangelical Free Church,
La Mirada, California

“It is always a delight to read a book written by someone saturated in Scripture. This is one of those books.”

Douglas Wilson, Senior Fellow of Theology, New St. Andrews College;
Pastor, Christ Church, Moscow, Idaho

“It is an exciting privilege to watch and benefit from ‘the coming of age’ of the discipline of biblical theology in our generation. But in the explosion of literature we have needed a simple, brief, popular-level introduction—someone to provide us with an aerial view of the forest before we begin making our way among all the trees. This is what Jim Hamilton has done for us here. *What Is Biblical Theology?* provides a very helpful jump start for beginning students, and students of all levels will be blessed in the reminder of the marvelous patterns and themes that make Scripture such a glorious book.”

Fred G. Zaspel, Pastor, Reformed Baptist Church, Franconia,
Pennsylvania

“I am truly amazed at all that Jim Hamilton has packed into this little volume. *What Is Biblical Theology?* is an engagingly written distillation of years of both scholarly and devotional study of the Bible. The reader will find a succinct, clear, and compelling guide to the overarching story of Scripture. It will be at the top of my list of books to recommend for any who want to better understand the Bible, the world, and their place in God’s story. This is a gift for which I am exceedingly thankful.”

Rob Lister, Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies,
Talbot School of Theology

“Want to know your Bible better? Of course you do! Jim Hamilton can help. *What Is Biblical Theology?* is a manual for seeing how the many books of the Bible tell the one story about Jesus Christ: who he is and what he has done. Dr. Hamilton will help you love Jesus more by understanding your Bible better.”

C. J. Mahaney, Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church, Louisville,
Kentucky

What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns

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Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Brandon Hill

Cover image: Brandon Hill Photos

First printing 2014

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-3771-4

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3772-1

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3773-8

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3774-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hamilton, James M., 1974–

What is biblical theology? : a guide to the Bible's story, symbolism, and patterns / James M. Hamilton Jr.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-3771-4 (tp)

1. Bible—Theology. 2. Bible—Introductions. I. Title.

BSS43.H3355 2014

230'.041—23

2013022763

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A BETTER WORLD BREAKS THROUGH

Sitting uneasily in his chair, straining for breath, he tilted his head toward his wife, nodded in the direction of my three sons, and said, “It’s good for them to be here.”

Looking at me he continued, gasping out the words, “We wanted to hide things like this. But it’s good for these boys to see me dying. Death is real.”

Later that night, his wife of more than fifty years became a widow.

Knowing that life was leaving his body, he saw right through our medicated, sanitized, hedonistic culture. He could ignore death no longer, and he was convinced others shouldn’t either. There was no avoiding it, so he looked it in the face and affirmed the goodness of the true story of the world. His approaching death was like a strong wind blowing away a fog of falsehood. A better understanding of the world broke through, as it had been doing since he was born again.

What we think and how we live is largely determined by the larger story in which we interpret our lives. Does your

story enable you to look death in the face? Does your story give you a hope that goes beyond the grave?

In the throes of death that night, my older brother in Christ was rejecting false stories of the world. He refused to live his last moments informed by stories that would have people pretend death isn't real or fear what lies beyond it.

He wouldn't have put it in these words, but he was affirming that it is good for children to see that the Bible's story is real. That's what he meant when he said that it was good for my boys (ages six, three, and one at the time) to be there as his body fought through its failing moments.

Will it take the nearness of your own death for you to reject false stories in favor of reality?

The world does have a true story. The Bible tells it. This book is about the Bible's big story, and it's about how we become people who live in that story. To do biblical theology is to think about the whole story of the Bible. We want to understand the organic development of the Bible's teaching so that we are interpreting particular parts of the story in light of the whole. As an acorn grows into an oak tree, Genesis 3:15 grows into the good news of Jesus Christ.

One of the primary aims of biblical theology is to understand and embrace the worldview of the biblical authors. In order to do this, we have to know the story they take for granted, the connections they see between the events in that story, and the ways they read later parts of the story by the light that emanates from its earlier parts.

The Bible has a narrative arc that begins at creation, rises over all that has been and will be, and lands at the end of all things. The prophetic and poetic parts of the Bible provide in-

terpretive commentary on the story, and the apocalypses unveil the way things are and will be.

The Bible's big story, this overarching narrative, is also built out of smaller stories. At the same time, the stories told in the Old Testament work together to set up a mystery resolved in Christ. Have you noticed the clues and hints that build to the climactic revelation?

Let's think more about what biblical theology is, and then we'll turn to the Bible's big story, the symbols that summarize and interpret the story, and the church's place in it.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?

What is biblical theology? The phrase *biblical theology* is used here to refer to the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors.

What is an “interpretive perspective”? It’s the framework of assumptions and presuppositions, associations and identifications, truths and symbols that are taken for granted as an author or speaker describes the world and the events that take place in it.

What do the biblical authors use this perspective to interpret? First, the biblical authors have interpreted earlier Scripture, or in the case of the very first author on record (Moses), accounts of God’s words and deeds that were passed down to him.

Second, they interpreted world history from creation to consummation.

And third, they interpreted the events and statements that they describe. Moses didn’t recount *everything* that Balaam said and did in the instances presented in Numbers 22–24. Moses

selected what he wanted, arranged it with care, and presented the true story. The presentation of Balaam's oracles that Moses gives us in the book of Numbers is already an interpretation of them, and because I believe that Moses was inspired by the Holy Spirit, I hold that his interpretation makes his account of the Balaam oracles *more* true, not less. More true because the way Moses selected, arranged, and presented (i.e., interpreted) enables his audience to see more clearly how what Balaam said and did fits into the true story of the world Moses tells in the Pentateuch.

To summarize, by the phrase *biblical theology* I mean the interpretive perspective reflected in the way the biblical authors have presented their understanding of earlier Scripture, redemptive history, and the events they are describing, recounting, celebrating, or addressing in narratives, poems, proverbs, letters, and apocalypses.

The previous sentence mentions various kinds of literature. The Bible is a book, and the men who wrote the sixty-six books that make up the Bible were engaged authors. That means we have to think about literature as we think about interpreting the Bible. A short guide like this cannot exhaust these topics, but it can point to the path and offer some thoughts on how to stay on it. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. The study of biblical theology is like a quest to become someone who can pull down strongholds with weapons mighty to God. For the quest to succeed we must learn to destroy arguments and lofty opinions raised against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:3–5). Welcome to this entry point on the path toward becoming a biblical theologian. With

the Lord's help, the quest will take you into another world, the thought-world that *is* biblical theology.

Here at the outset, let me say what biblical theology is not—in my opinion, anyway. Some use the phrase *biblical theology* to mean something other than what I have hinted at above. Though we're using the same phrase, we are coming at the subject very differently. By *biblical theology* I do not mean “my theology is more biblical than yours.” Nor do I refer to that stick some biblicists keep at hand for whopping the unsuspecting systematic theologian who happens along (I once heard a biblical scholar declare, “Systematic theology is bad; biblical theology is good”).

After the Enlightenment, certain ways of thinking about the world fell out of fashion in the academy. Particularly, the Bible's. Heretics who styled themselves as courageous free thinkers chucked ideas that had prevailed among students of the Bible—biblical ideas about God's sovereignty, the inspiration of Scripture, and the coherence and unity of the Bible's message.

The story the Bible tells was rejected, and an alternative was put in its place. The evidence for this alternative narrative exists in the “scholarly” imagination. This alternative narrative has its own time line, its own authors, and its own account of what really went down: evolutionary development, competing ideologies, the documentary hypothesis, and so forth. On this reading, what the biblical texts say and the story the Bible tells is mere propaganda.

We have seen a world of responses to the influence of the (so-called) Enlightenment on biblical interpretation. One might say the responses have ranged from pole to pole.

At the South Pole the liberal response to the Enlightenment was to develop the academic discipline of biblical theology as a way to sift the wheat from the chaff. Liberal academics sought to discern which parts of the Bible's theology remained relevant and which parts no longer were. Someone doing biblical theology in this way today might employ the method to argue that the Bible endorses same-sex marriage and denounces the use of fossil fuel. If the text as a whole is not authoritative, it easily conforms to our agenda.

From the North Pole, the conservative response to the Enlightenment at many points sought to use biblical theology to reassert the unity of the Bible. In an effort to establish common ground and persuade skeptics, conservatives (at least for the sake of argument) conceded the chucked ideas. They were trying to prove the Bible's coherence to those who thought its unity had been shattered, so they resorted to methods and assumptions developed by and approved in the unbelieving guild. These methods and assumptions naturally placed limits on what the Bible could say.

There is of course a vast terrain between these two poles, plenty of room for a variety of "biblical theological" programs. You might have a scholar trained at the South Pole (in a liberal environment) who critiques the excesses of "Antarctica" (the left) from a biblical theological perspective. Conservatives get really excited about these types. Or you might have a scholar trained on the North Pole denying the existence of true north. These scholars find themselves the darlings of post-evangelical publishers.

The thing to note about these poles is that they're on the same planet. That is, the biblical theologians going about their

work these ways, whether starting from North Pole or South, are all living in the same world, breathing the same air, sharing the same assumptions. But what if biblical theology is a bridge going somewhere else? What if it's a way to get out of one world into another?

This book is not trying to be a compass you can use to go north or south. It's trying to help you find treasure in the trash. The way of thinking modeled and taught by the Bible's authors was scrapped, but when we pull these ideas out of the garbage, we find them worth more than the million-dollar painting *Tres Personajes* that Elizabeth Gibson found in the trash on the street in New York City.

Our aim is to trace out the contours of the network of assumptions reflected in the writings of the biblical authors. If we can see what the biblical authors assumed about story, symbol, and church, we will glimpse the world as they saw it. To catch a glimpse of the world as they saw it is to see the real world.

I hasten to add that the Holy Spirit inspired the biblical authors. That gave them a level of certainty about their interpretive conclusions that we cannot have about ours because the Holy Spirit does not inspire us and guarantee our inerrancy. If he did, our books would be added to the canon of Scripture, which is not happening. Still, we're called to follow the apostles as they followed Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1), and part of doing that means learning to interpret Scripture, redemptive history, and the events that happen to us the way the biblical authors did, even if absolute certainty eludes us.

What I'm suggesting is that the Bible teaches Christians how the Bible should be read. Studying biblical theology is

the best way to learn from the Bible how to read the Bible as a Christian should. By the same token, studying the Bible is the best way to learn biblical theology.

How should a follower of Jesus read the Bible? The way Jesus did. Jesus of Nazareth did not write any of the books in the Bible, but he taught the writers of the New Testament how to interpret earlier Scripture, redemptive history, and the events they were narrating and addressing. On the human level, Jesus learned the interpretive perspective he taught to his disciples from Moses and the Prophets.

So I'm arguing that the biblical authors operated from a shared interpretive perspective. They inhabited the same thought-world, breathed its air, and shared its assumptions. The world they lived in wasn't Darwin's. In their world we might find things for which we have no analogy and of which we have no experience. There is no analogy for the God of the Bible. He stands alone. We will experience him only if he reveals himself. In the Bible he has done just that. How do we come to know him? From his revelation of himself, from learning to read the Bible from the Bible itself. To learn to read the Bible is to learn to understand this world from the perspective of the biblical authors, which is to learn a divinely inspired perspective.

Moses learned and developed the ability to see the world this way from the accounts of God's words and deeds that he received, from his contemplation of what God had done in his own life, and from the inspiration of the Spirit of God. The biblical authors who followed Moses in the Old Testament, whether historians, prophets, psalmists, or sages, learned the interpretive perspective that Moses modeled for them and had

it confirmed by other Scripture available to them. Jesus then learned to read the Bible, history, and life from Moses and the Prophets, and he taught this perspective to his followers (Luke 24). What we find in the New Testament, then, is Christ-taught, Spirit-inspired biblical interpretation.

The biblical authors model a perspective for interpreting the Bible, history, and current events. Should we adopt that perspective today? Absolutely. Why? I'm convinced that the biblical authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit, that God guided them to the truth by his Spirit, and that, therefore, they got it right.

I am confident that the apostles got it right and that those who would follow Jesus (Christians!) should follow the apostles as they followed Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1). I am also confident that as we try to follow Jesus by following the apostles, we will make mistakes. The history of interpretation is full of mistakes. We see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12). But again, the fact that the Spirit is not ensuring the inerrancy of our conclusions does not mean we should adopt an *un-* or *a-*biblical perspective when reading the Bible, thinking about redemptive history, or trying to understand our own lives. It does mean that we should hold our conclusions with humility, fight that manxome foe, and allow the Bible to correct us.

At this point I hope you want more—more of the Bible, mainly, but also more information on how to understand and embrace the network of assumptions modeled by the biblical authors. As mentioned above, a short book like this is a little like standing by that path that leads to the bridge that leads to a different world. The Jabberwock and the frumious

Bandersnatch prowl the path, and you can take your chances starting from this point. I'm writing this book because I'm convinced that the world to which this path leads is worth any risk to reach.

There are more detailed descriptions of this path, even guided tours of it, but for those with an opportunity and an adventurous spirit, here's what this book has for you. The rest of it falls into three parts: the first sets out the Bible's big story, the second looks at the way the biblical authors use symbols to summarize and interpret that story, and the third considers the part the church plays in that story.

So the three parts of this book can be put into three words: *story*, *symbol*, and *church*. There's obviously more that could be said about biblical theology, but these are the three things about the path to the bridge into another world we'll focus on here: the overarching metanarrative that is the Bible's big story, the way the biblical authors use key symbols to summarize and interpret that story, and the place of the church in it.

If biblical theology is a way to get into another world, the world inhabited by the biblical authors, you have a right to understand my intentions. My hope is that you cross the bridge into their thought-world and never come back. I hope you will breathe the air of the Bible's world, recognize it as the real Narnia, and never want to leave.

If this happens, you will have come to inhabit the Bible's story. My prayer is that its symbols and patterns will shape the way you view the world, and that your understanding of the church's place in story and symbol will make you know the riches of God's inheritance in the saints (Eph. 1:18), the great power "he worked in Christ when he raised him from the

dead” (1:20), and the glory he displays in the church and in Christ Jesus forever (Eph. 3:21).

In brief, I hope that you will adopt the perspective of the biblical authors and that you will read the world from the Bible’s perspective, rather than reading the Bible from the world’s.

Part 3

**THE BIBLE'S
LOVE STORY**

A SONG FOR THE LADY IN WAITING

The Bride of Christ and Biblical Theology

No one knows what happened to the mother. The baby girl was found in her blood. The kind father who found her—not her own father—literally gave her life. When the baby was found, the cord hadn't been cut or the birth blood washed from the newborn. The father provided everything necessary, and the child was adopted and raised in a safe and loving environment. The father who found her began to make plans to betroth her to his own son.

When she reached maturity, she took a tragic turn. She trusted her own beauty and sought to make a way for herself. Soon she was selling priceless things. Herself. Before long she was enslaved, hopeless, ruined.

Then the father who first found her bought her out of slavery. Having redeemed her, he did all he could to cleanse and purify her. And to her astonishment, he betrothed her to his son.

THE BIBLE'S LOVE STORY

They were married and soon she conceived a child. Bringing him into the world was exhilarating and horrific. This was no ordinary child. Moreover, a dragon sought to devour him. Somehow the baby lived.

Imagine the world's great villain trying to kill her baby boy, and the boy living! After the boy escaped, the dragon turned on her. Somehow she lived too. Curses were overcome by blessings.

How had she eluded that dragon and made it to the wilderness? God only knows. Then once in the wilderness, all seemed lost as the flood rose, but then—God knows how—the earth opened its mouth and swallowed that flood. You might think her enemies were opposing God himself, their efforts always thwarted.

Do you recognize these events? Do they sound like Ezekiel 16 and Revelation 12? In Ezekiel 16 we find Israel personified as the baby girl found in her blood, to whom God gave life. Then when Israel grew to maturity, she committed spiritual adultery against the Lord. In Revelation 12, Mary symbolizes both Israel and the church. She gives birth to Jesus, and the dragon tries to eat him alive as soon as he is born. This bit about the dragon is a symbolic interpretation of Satan's efforts through Herod to kill Jesus. Then the mother, symbolizing the people of God, is preserved through the wilderness against all Satan's efforts to destroy her.

The Bible can be mystifying, can't it? The world and the events of our lives can be no less confusing. What are we to make of dragons trying to eat babies, of a woman carried on the wings of an eagle, of the wedding of a lamb? Do lambs get married?

Here's a leading question connected to the ones I've just asked: how are we to understand ourselves as the church? Now a slightly different, though related, question: if the church is so special in God's program, why does it seem so unimpressive?

If you're wondering what the main point of this section will be, let me come right out and say it: the Bible's story and symbolism teach us as the church to understand who we are, what we face, and how we should live as we wait for the coming of our King and Lord.

We looked at the Bible's story line in part 1, and at the way the Bible's symbolism—imagery, typology, and narrative patterns—summarizes and interprets that story line in part 2. Now in part 3 we explore how these things help us think about the church. We will do this on the basis of what we have seen of stories and symbols thus far.

As we think about the church in the story, these questions will help us reflect on the church's place in biblical theology: What part does the church play in the Bible's story? Who is she? What is her setting? What creates the tension in her part of the plot as the wider narrative develops? How is that tension resolved?

When we think about the way the biblical authors symbolize the church, we are exploring how the symbolism they used summarizes and interprets the church's place in the story. We don't merely want to think about story and symbol; we want to be swept up in them. We want to be identified by these symbols. Biblical theology is not just an interesting topic. It informs who we are and how we live. It's a way of getting out of a false world into the real one, a transporter enabling us to inhabit the story of the Scriptures. The Bible is the real *Hitch-*

THE BIBLE'S LOVE STORY

hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, and biblical theology is the *Heart of Gold* that improbably moves us into the real world. We engage in biblical theology so as not to misinterpret what happens to us, seek our identity in the false world, and waste our lives.

The true story of the world and the church's place in it is a stupendous tale. Best of all, it's true. This true story of the world has more grief and joy, more drama and excitement, more hope and satisfaction than any other story the world has known.

The baby in her blood washed clean. The ruined lady renewed. The whore transformed into the pure bride because her betrothed died to save her. "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32).

Let's consider the church's identity, setting, and role in the plot.

THE CHURCH'S IDENTITY IN THE STORY

The church is a group of baptized believers in Jesus, right? Human beings. Those who believe, joined together in one hope in one Lord Jesus, sharing one faith, having experienced the same baptism, and worshiping one God by the power of one Spirit (cf. Eph. 4:4–6).

Following the Old Testament precedent of speaking of God's people metaphorically, Jesus and the apostles spoke of the church metaphorically. Metaphors identify things with what they are not. The point of a metaphor is to capture a truth about the thing metaphored. So God is not a stone, but the truth that God is stable, unchangeable, solid, and reliable is communicated when we say, "The LORD is my rock" (Ps. 18:2). Jesus and his apostles also used metaphors to communicate the truth about the church.

SHEEP OF THE SHEPHERD

For instance, Jesus might refer to his people as sheep, but they're not furry little animals on four legs; they're people.

THE BIBLE'S LOVE STORY

Jesus calls his people sheep because sheep have characteristics that his people have. Sheep are cared for and led by shepherds, and Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Shepherds protect the sheep, even risking their own lives. Jesus laid down his life to protect his sheep.

Is Jesus your shepherd? Are you a Christian? If you're in doubt, I would encourage you to stop reading this book and go read Romans from beginning to end. Note especially the declaration in Romans 10:13 that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

You won't find a better shepherd than Jesus. We want to be people formed by Psalm 23, confessing that the Lord is our shepherd, thinking of ourselves as those in his care, and living like it too.

BRIDE OF CHRIST

The church is a group of people, not an individual female making her way down the aisle. But the intimacy between Jesus and his people is approximated by marriage. Ephesians 5:22–33 teaches that the sacrificial love of Jesus for his people is to be reflected in a husband's love for his wife. The submission of the church to Jesus is to be reflected in a wife's submission to her husband. The wait between the identification of the people of Jesus and their final salvation is like the wait between the betrothal and the grand celebration of the wedding day (cf. Eph. 1:13–14).

For all these reasons and more, Jesus identifies himself as the Bridegroom when asked why his disciples don't fast (Mark 2:19), and he tells parables about a wedding feast to describe his coming kingdom (Matt. 22:1–14; 25:1–13). Paul says that

the mystery of marriage is about Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22–33). Believers are depicted as pure virgins (Rev. 14:4), and when Jesus returns for his people, the multitude announces that the marriage of the Lamb has come and the bride has made herself ready (Rev. 19:7).

This metaphor of the church as a bride is meant to build our identity. We are to think of ourselves in bridal terms. We are not to commit spiritual adultery against the Lord Jesus. We are to save ourselves for the Bridegroom, as a bride saves herself for her husband.

BODY OF CHRIST

Paul's statement that marriage refers to Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32) immediately follows his quotation of Genesis 2:24, declaring that man and woman become one flesh in marriage (Eph. 5:31). This quotation of Genesis immediately follows the declaration, "We are members of his body" (Eph. 5:30), and earlier in the passage Paul refers to Christ as "the head of the church, his body" (5:23).

There is a connection, then, between the one-flesh union of a married man and woman and the union with Christ experienced by believers. The use of both the bride-and-bridegroom metaphor and the head-and-body metaphor in Ephesians 5 means that these are mutually interpretive. The head-and-body metaphor stresses Christ's leadership, to which the church submits (Eph. 5:24). The head directs the body, determining what the body will do, and the body puts in action what the head has decided (Col. 1:18).

The body metaphor also communicates the unity of the church (Col. 3:15). The church is one body that has been rec-

THE BIBLE'S LOVE STORY

onciled to God through the death of Christ (Eph. 2:16). There are not different bodies in the church, divided according to Jew and Gentile or black and white. The unity of the church transcends racial divisions (Eph. 3:6).

The ministry of the church is a process of the building up of the body (Eph. 4:12, 16). The various gifts of the Spirit given to the church are for this purpose (1 Cor. 12:1–31). The Spirit baptizes us into the body when we are united by faith to Christ in his death and resurrection as we are immersed in the baptismal waters (1 Cor. 12:12–13). The Father elects. The Son redeems. The Spirit seals.

Church membership is built on this body metaphor. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:27, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” We are joined to one another and Christ. A Christian who is not a member of a church is like a hand or an eye that is not joined to the rest of the body. Can it live? Will it be useful?

We are united to one another by virtue of our union with Christ. We need one another the way a knee needs the rest of the leg, the way the leg needs the foot, and we must all be connected to the head, Christ.

These metaphors are to shape our understanding of ourselves. We are the bride of Christ, and we are his body, joined to him in a way that is approximated by the one-flesh union of a man and woman in marriage.

THE ADOPTED FAMILY OF GOD

The church is the bride and body of the Son, and its members are the adopted (Rom. 8:15), reborn children of the Father. This

makes us part of the family of God (1 John 3:1, 10; 5:2), members of his household (Eph. 2:19).

This adoption formerly belonged to Israel (Rom. 9:4), whereby God identified Israel as his firstborn son (Ex. 4:22). In God's eternal plan, it is now the church that is adopted (Eph. 1:5).

We are not neglected. We are the sheep of the Good Shepherd.

We are not forsaken. We are the beloved of the Bridegroom.

We are not alone. We are members of his body.

We are not strangers. We are adopted into God's family.

If you're not a believer in Jesus, who looks after you? Who will come for you? To whom are you joined? Do you have a family? If you will repent of your sin and trust in Jesus, you can be part of the family of God.

TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). He himself is its cornerstone, and the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). The whole church is being joined together and growing to be a holy temple of the Lord (Eph. 2:21). The members of the church are living stones in this spiritual house, which is also a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God (1 Pet. 2:5).

We are not some barren, uninhabited, trackless waste. Our lives are inhabited by the living God. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). God inhabits our praises (Ps. 22:3).

As we believe the Bible, the Holy Spirit mediates the presence of Christ to us and fills us with God (Eph. 3:14–19). The idea that the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit is directly connected to the church's setting in the big story of the Bible.

THE CHURCH'S SETTING IN THE STORY

The setting still concerns the whole world. When God put Adam in the garden of Eden, Adam's responsibility was to expand its borders so that God's glory would cover the dry lands as the waters cover the sea. Adam was cast out of the garden. When God put Israel in the land, the nation's responsibility was to expand its borders so that God's glory would cover the dry lands as the waters cover the sea.

On the way to the land, God gave Israel a symbol of the story's setting when he instructed the people to build the tabernacle as a representation of the world. The temple later replaced this tabernacle. God's presence in the tabernacle and the temple required that everything in it be holy, and everything around it clean.

The church is now the temple of the Holy Spirit, and this speaks to God's presence in the church and the need for holiness and discipline. Churches that do not discipline jeopardize the lives of those who, like Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10), disregard God's instructions as they approach

THE BIBLE'S LOVE STORY

him and risk being consumed by an outburst of his holiness (cf. 1 Cor. 11:27–32).

These realities—that the temple is a symbol of the cosmos, and that the church is the temple of the Spirit—mean that the church is to be a preview of what the world is going to become. The church is a picture of the new temple. The redeemed who are in God's presence, who know him, enjoy him, serve him, and live for him—this is how the whole world will be in the coming age.

Just as God put Adam in the garden to extend its borders so that Yahweh's glory would cover the dry lands as the waters cover the sea, God put Israel in the land to take up that same task, giving them a preview of what it would look like when he filled tabernacle and temple with his glory. Jesus sent his disciples on the same errand to all nations: as disciples are made, the temple grows, the place of God's presence expands, and God's glory spreads over the dry land. In the age to come, these realities will be fully realized. The earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of God.

The fact that the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit seems to inform what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:14 about unbelieving spouses being "sanctified." The unbeliever still needs to repent and believe (1 Cor. 7:16), but contagious holiness is imparted to the unbeliever by the believer with whom he or she is joined in marriage (7:14). These ideas also seem to be what Paul has in mind when he speaks of the children being "unclean" if they are not kept in contact with the temple of the Spirit, the believing parent.

We are no longer in a specific allotment of land, but our responsibility is still to cover the dry lands with God's glory

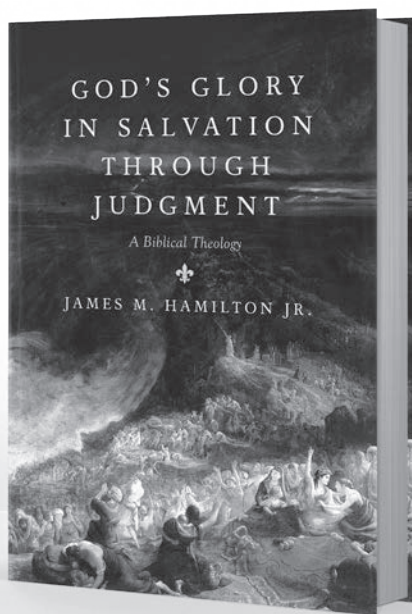
as the waters cover the sea. The people of God are no longer a sociopolitical nation with boundaries. We are transnational. We are no longer an ethnic entity with a military. We are from all nations.

Under the old covenant, the nation of Israel subdued the nations round about by military conquest, bringing them under the authority of the law of the Lord. In the new covenant, the church has no military agenda. Rather, we seek to bring people to our point of view by persuading them to believe what we believe, convincing them to submit themselves to the Lord's authority.

We no longer go to the temple in Jerusalem to worship the Lord. Now we worship the Lord in Spirit and in truth wherever God's people gather (John 4:21–24).

Thinking about the setting also returns us to another aspect of our identity. We are no longer in bondage, but we are not yet home. We are like the Israelites. They were slaves in Egypt until God redeemed them, and then they were wayfarers, making their way to the Land of Promise. We too have been liberated from bondage to sin, and we are wayfarers. We are exiles from Eden who have heard the call to come out of Babylon, and we are now returning from exile. Our destination is the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:10). We will dwell in the new and better Eden, the fulfillment of the Promised Land, the new heaven and new earth.

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4335-3771-4

ISBN-10: 1-4335-3771-0



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U.S. \$12.99