

Goldsworthy, Graeme. *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991. 251 pp. \$16.32

### **Introduction**

*According to Plan* by Graeme Goldsworthy serves as an introductory work in the field of Biblical theology. In this book, Goldsworthy divides the study of Biblical theology up into four parts. The first part of the book deals with the question of *why* we should study Biblical theology. After establishing the *why* of Biblical theology, Goldsworthy goes on to discuss *how* we should study Biblical Theology. This discussion inevitably leads to question of *what* is Biblical theology. This third section of the book comprised the majority of the book. After a concise but thorough presentation of Biblical theology, the fourth section outlines for the reader how Biblical theology is to be applied to life.

The book is formatted for the beginning Biblical theologian. The author aids the reader by providing tables and summaries at the end of most chapters. This preserves the unity of the books content and helps the reader to see the relationship and the progressive nature of revelation in the Bible. These features make for a relatively easy read and quick reference.

### **Summary**

According to Goldsworthy, the driving conviction behind this book is that “learning to grasp the unity of the Bible is necessary for a right understanding of the meaning of any individual text (7).” It is this conviction that led Goldsworthy to write an introductory work on the discipline of Biblical theology. But what is Biblical theology? Goldsworthy understands Biblical theology to be the method of study by which Christians are enabled to relate any Bible story to the whole message of the Bible, which is ultimately a message that centers on Jesus Christ. Biblical theology, then, begins and ends with Jesus Christ “as we see every part of the Bible in relationship to him and his saving work (47).” In other words, Jesus Christ is the lens through which all of scripture is to be understood and applied. Having stated the purpose and presuppositions of this work, we now turn to the four divisions of the work as outlined by Goldsworthy.

As stated in the introduction, the first section addresses the question of “why” we are to study biblical theology. The answer to this question is related to the proper interpretation of scripture. If people are to rightly understand and handle the word of God, then it is necessary for them to be able to properly interpret scripture within its original context and according to the

author's intended meaning. Goldsworthy proposes that the study of Biblical theology will greatly aid the interpreter in determining these areas that are vital for Biblical interpretation. He believes Biblical theology does this by giving the interpreter the tools to relate each particular story to its "part in the unfolding drama" of scripture "that leads to its climax in the person and work of Jesus Christ (21)." Here we can already note the dependence of Biblical theology on understanding scripture in terms of its relationship to Jesus Christ.

In the second section of the book, Goldsworthy deals with the epistemology of Biblical theology regarding how we can really know God. In this section, the reader will find a short discussion regarding the self-revelation of God in His word and the various studies employed by Christians to understand God's special revelation. Another aspect of this section is the discussion on pages 36-46 regarding the three schools of thought on how people come to "know what is real and true (36)." Within this section, Goldsworthy discusses the aspects and differences between Secular Humanism, Theistic Humanism, and Christian Theism. A summary of those positions can be found on page 43. Goldsworthy concludes this discussion by explaining the presumptions of biblical theology and thus denounces all approaches that "employ humanistic presuppositions (45)." A summary of Goldsworthy's presuppositions are listed on page 45. It should be noted that Goldsworthy stresses the *Christian* aspect of theism as being fundamental to the discipline of biblical theology. In his understand, it is not an enough to simply be a theist, one must be a *Christian* theist. He makes this point even more clearly in his introduction to chapter 4 where he says that, "we do biblical theology as Christians, not neutral observers. (48)"

In closing this second section of his book, Goldsworthy highlights scripture as the written aspect of God's self-revelation to His people. In other words, the Bible is the primary source from which Christians know God. Therefore, according to Goldsworthy, biblical theology has everything to do with having a proper knowledge and understanding of God as revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is in this closing section that Goldsworthy presents the nature of scripture as being the "divine-human word of God. (63)" This means that "the Bible is a union of a truly divine word and a truly human word in one book. (63)" As God's word in written form, the Bible is progressively revealing truth about God and his kingdom that finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Goldsworthy concludes this section by discussing the typology found in scripture that anticipates and points to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The third section begins with the Gospel of Jesus Christ being presented as the quintessential event by which all of scripture is to be interpreted. Goldsworthy believes that in order for us to properly understand the Old Testament, we must first start with a correct understanding of the Gospel. Goldsworthy states it by saying that, “Jesus Christ is the goal of the Old Testament and provides its true meaning. (88)” With this foundation laid, Goldsworthy will now begin a survey of redemptive history that seeks to reveal each events relationship to Jesus Christ.

He begins by discussing the kingdom of God, which will emerge as one of the central themes of the book. He believes that the kingdom of God, as established at creation, is the perfect relationship of God to his creation. The key relationship within the kingdom of God is His relationship to Adam and Eve as they are created in God’s image. This kingdom pattern was established at creation, but is later confused and broken when Adam and Eve choose to “be like God” instead of remaining as “the image of God.” The image of God is not completely lost at man’s fall into sin, but it is severely marred and in need of restoration. Man’s choice to rebel affected not only his livelihood, but it affected the entirety of creation. Thus the curse of the fall fell upon all creation causing the kingdom pattern of perfect relationship to God to be damaged and in need of repair. The rest of redemptive history will tell the story of how God restores the perfect relationship between Himself and creation through Jesus Christ.

The first sign of this redemption is seen in the covenant that God made with Noah. It is in this covenant that we see God’s provision for Noah and his family through the Ark. After the flood waters had subsided, Noah and his family “mark a new beginning of the human race (115).” It is not too terribly long after this beginning, though, that we see another division in the people. This division leads to the eventually birth of Abraham, the father of many nations. Just as God had established a covenant with Noah, we see God establishing a covenant with Abraham that promises to make him the one through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The remarkable nature of this covenant with Abraham is the fact that “the promise was repeatedly made against a backdrop of events that seemed to make its fulfillment impossible. (121)” An example of this is found in the fact that Abraham was one hundred years old at the time of God’s promise to give him a son. Goldsworthy notes though that “this emphasizes the fact that the birth of the child is due to the promise of God, which is incapable of being fulfilled by purely natural means (123).” All subsequent dealings with Abraham and his descendents

(Isaac, Jacob, Joseph) point to the “faithfulness of God to his promises (124),” wherein God “promises that Abraham’s descendants through Isaac and Jacob will possess the land, be God’s special people, and be the instrument of blessing for all nations (128).”

From Abraham, Goldsworthy moves to the Exodus as a pattern of redemption. Just as the pattern of the kingdom was established at creation, so the pattern of redemption was to be established and foreshadowed until its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In the Exodus, we see the people of God in captivity. To makes matters worse and once again threaten the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, “Pharaoh orders that all newborn boys should be drowned in the Nile (132).” God’s promise would not be thwarted by the schemes of man. God directs a young woman to place her newborn child into a basket and place him in the river where he will be found by the princess. This newborn child was Moses. Moses would act as God’s mouthpiece before Pharaoh to command him to set the captives free. Ultimately, Pharaoh refused to set the captives free until the last of the ten plagues that God had sent upon Egypt. The tenth plague threatened the death of every first born child whose family did not “believe God and follow his directions (135).” The directions that were given are what we understand to be the Passover, “wherein a spotless lamb is to be killed with the blood being placed above the doorpost of each house and the flesh being roasted and eaten with herbs and unleavened bread (135).” Goldsworthy comments, “Where the blood is seen on the house the Lord will pass over it and no death will plague those within (135).” The aspect of bloodshed is crucial to understanding the pattern of redemption as it is expressed in God’s dealings with Israel. Pharaoh did not heed God’s instruction and thus his firstborn child was slain. This drove Pharaoh to free the captives only to later have his army chase them and be completely destroyed by the crushing waters of the Red Sea.

As redemptive history moves forward, God continues to progressively reveal aspects of the future and full redemption to his people. The next stage of redemptive history is the giving of the law through Moses to the people of Israel. God reminds his people of his promise to Abraham to make him a great nation and possess the Promised Land (which is a shadow of the realm in which all of creation once again relates perfectly to God). Having entered into covenant with the people of Israel, God gives them the law to instruct them so “that they might know what their new relationship to God means for the way they live (143).” But even though these recently liberated Israelites are given the law to instruct them, it does not take them long to “grumble and

openly rebel (151)” against God. Israel’s history is marked by refusals to obey God and trust his promises. This refusal led to forty years of grumbling and wandering in the wilderness which ends with a new generation of adults, under the leadership of Joshua, finally entering into the Promised Land of Canaan. With Joshua as their leader, the obligation of obedience is laid upon Him as the leader and the representative of the nation. God ordained that the king or leader of the nation serve as their representative. If the king was faithful to the law of God, then God would deal with the people according to the king’s faithfulness. If the king was unfaithful to the law of God, then God would deal with people according to the king’s unfaithfulness and rebellion. This is important to see as Goldsworthy will draw the parallel later between this representative headship and the representation of Christ on behalf of the elect.

Another element of the promise to Abraham is revealed in this representative language as Goldsworthy begins to speak of the how “all the nations will be blessed through Abraham (159).” He says, “The one nation, a priestly nation, will mediate God’s blessings to all the nations of the world (159).” Here is where we start to see the significance of Israel’s being called the “Son of God” as we understand Israel to be pointing to the true son of God who will mediate the blessing of redemption to all the nations of the world. Goldsworthy makes the helpful point that “the events of saving history in the Old Testament prefigure and demonstrate the pattern of the one true and perfect saving act yet to come (161).” He continues and says that “the failures of the saving figures point to the fact that the real saving event still lies in the future (161).”

Moving forward, we see the Israelites respond to the threats on their Promised Land by seeking to appoint a king. The problem is not with kingship itself, but rather with the type of king that they would appoint. After a series of unsuccessful and disobedient kings, God draws “a man after God’s own heart” to lead the people of Israel. This man is David. Goldsworthy notes that “God’s covenant with David is of utmost importance for understanding the theology that surrounds the most notable of all the kings (167).” David’s desire was to build a temple for God, but he would not see this desire fulfilled in his lifetime. Solomon, his son, would go on to build a temple for God that would later be destroyed, thus showing that a greater and abiding meeting place for the people of God was to come in the future. Goldsworthy continues saying, “David shall have a son who shall indeed build the temple and whose throne will be established forever (167).” This promise to David sums up all the previous covenant promises and focuses them on David’s descendants.

Thus far, all of the covenantal promises from God have foreshadowed the “regeneration” or restoration of the order that was lost at the Fall. This foreshadowing of restoration points back to the kingdom pattern of the perfect relationship between God and his creation that existed before the Fall. All of redemptive history is pointing to that final restoration of the Kingdom of God. Over the course of the giving of these covenantal promises, there was a need for constant warning against covenant-breaking on the part of the Israelites. In order to warn the people, God gave them prophets to 1) show them how they had broken the covenant, 2) pronounce judgment on unfaithfulness to the covenant and 3) to speak a message of comfort to the faithful. God is revealing himself and his intentions for the restoration of the kingdom through his prophets. The elements of the kingdoms restoration are: God, the People of God, and The Promised Land. The prophets reveal God to be the “Savior God who restores the kingdom in which he, his people, and the created order relate perfectly (189).” Thus the prophets serve to predict the restoration of the Kingdom of God that has been foreshadowed in the covenants that God has established with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. For many Jews, this restoration of the Kingdom of God took place when they returned from exile to the Promised Land to establish a Jewish state. The problem, as Goldsworthy notes, is that “there was no glorious return and no magnificent temple set in the midst of the regenerated earth (196).” In other words, even though they were back in the Promised Land, the perfect relationship between God and his creation had yet to be restored.

At this point, Goldsworthy feels that enough of a foundation has been laid to turn to the New Testament for a better understanding of the events of redemptive history. He begins his discussion of the New Testament by stressing once more the unity of scripture. He says, “Let us remind ourselves that there is continuity between the Old and New Testaments in that the New fulfills the Old and the Old testifies to the Christ of the New (202).” With this framework in place, Goldsworthy now turns to the relationship between the kingdom of God and Jesus Christ. As stated earlier, there are three fundamental elements of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament: God, the people of God, and the Promised Land. In the New Testament, we learn that Jesus is the antitype of all three of these elements. First, “Jesus is the true God (202).” Though the Jews expected the Davidic prince to “suddenly come in power” to restore the kingdom of God, Jesus came in humility in the form of a helpless baby. Goldsworthy notes that “the incarnation is at the very center of the gospel event by which God restores the true relationship between himself and the human race (203).” In other words, Jesus’ deity was absolutely

necessary for salvation. Secondly, “Jesus is the true people of God (204).” Not only was it necessary for Jesus to be fully God, but he also had to be completely human in order to fulfill what “was necessary for the gospel of our salvation (204).” As the last Adam, Jesus would serve as the head of a “new human race (204).” He would pass the test of temptation where the others had failed. Lastly, “Jesus is the new creation (206).” Jesus is the new and abiding meeting place where people come to meet God. Goldsworthy declares, “The strategy of salvation then is that God restores the kingdom of God by Christ, through the work of Christ, and actually in the person of Christ (207).” In other words, all the promises of God are fulfilled and find their ultimate meaning in Jesus Christ, who fulfills all of God’s promises for his people.

Goldsworthy goes on to state that Jesus can only be our savior “if what belongs to him is somehow shared with us (210).” This takes place by the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. By sending the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ presence indwells the believer and is taken into the entire world through the preaching of the gospel. “In this way the nations will be gathered to Christ, who takes the place of the old Israel and Jerusalem (212).” This is the means that God has ordained the kingdom of God be advanced throughout the world and eventually restored at the return of Christ. As for the believers who are indwelt with the Holy Spirit, the new creation (the restoration of perfect relationship with God) is already and not yet. It is already restored in the sense that it took place perfectly in Christ for us. It is not yet in the sense that we are presently being restored to a right relationship with God through the work of sanctification that will be completed at the return of Christ which will result in glorification. Key to this discussion is the believer union with Christ by faith which is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. Finally, the new creation that is fulfilled in Christ and initiated in the believer will be consummated at the return of Christ. It is at the consummation that the believer will receive a resurrected body to dwell with God for all eternity and thus the complete restoration of the kingdom of God will be finished.

In the last section of *According to Plan*, Goldsworthy discusses the “where” of Biblical theology as it relates to the practical outworking of Biblical theology. Here he looks at the areas of guidance and the resurrection, providing the reader with a “how-to” guide on using the methods of Biblical theology to study the scriptures. This section is brief and serves mainly as an example of how Biblical theology relates to all other aspects of theological study.

## Critical Evaluation

For the most part, I commend this work by Goldsworthy. I found it to be a helpful overview of Biblical theology that really whetted my appetite for further study in the future. There were areas though; where I felt he could have been clearer in his summaries. For instance, it appeared as though he waited until chapter 20 to really give a good explanation of the tables at the back of the chapters. I realize that this could simply be my ignorance to perceive the relationships of the themes in those tables to the kingdom of God. Once an explanation had been given, I found them to be most helpful. I only wish that the explanation would have been earlier in the book.

Another critique that I had was his discussion of the covenant on page 192. Goldsworthy writes, “There is only one commitment of God to his purpose to establish his kingdom. Thus there is one covenant which has a number of different expressions in this course of redemptive history.” As a Baptist, I believe that God has one, overarching purpose in redemptive history, namely to establish his kingdom. But even though I concede that God has an overarching purpose in redemptive history, I do not believe that there is Biblical warrant to draw a one-to-one parallel between an overarching purpose and a single covenant with different expression. For me, this reminds me of the “covenant of works/covenant of grace” language that is so popular within reformed groups. As mentioned earlier, I believe in an overarching purpose, but I do not equate that purpose with a solitary covenant with several administrations. I, on the other hand, believe that there is enough discontinuity between the Old and the New Covenants to say that they are in fact, two separate covenants wherein the Old Covenant points to and anticipates its fulfillment in the New Covenant as ushered in by Jesus Christ. Again, it is possible that I have misunderstood Goldsworthy and misrepresented his understanding of the “one covenant,” but from what I can tell I reject the notion of one solitary, covenant.

As for the things that I appreciated about the book, the list is a long one. First, I appreciate the manner in which he approaches the subject of Biblical theology as a whole from a presuppositional standpoint. Without those presuppositions in places regarding the nature of God, the nature of the Bible, Biblical epistemology, and the gospel, all would be quite vain in attempting to make any real head way in the study of Biblical theology. I especially thought it was a helpful qualification to make that we do Biblical theology as Christians, not mere

spectators. As we deal with Biblical theology, the gospel must be at the forefront of our minds as we seek to relate the Biblical revelation to the grand story line of redemption.

Above all things, I appreciate the books Christ-centered approach to understanding Scripture. I come from reformed background that in many ways is highly influenced by covenant theology. This is not to say that covenant theology is necessarily a bad thing, but I do find that it sometimes leads to the emphasis of scripture being placed where it ought not to be placed. For instance, much attention is given to the Ten Commandments at my church. They are praised as the ultimate standard of ethical living, God's unchanging moral law, when in actuality; they are but a shadow that should find its substance and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This, of course, is not to say that they are irrelevant, but rather that they are misunderstood. That is why I greatly appreciate Goldsworthy's approach to understanding the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus Christ and the gospel. As Goldsworthy correctly notes on page 222 that, "the exhortations in the New Testament call us to conformity with Christ, not with the law of Moses. It is striking that the Ten Commandments are not set forth as the standard of Christian conduct." My heart resonates with this statement. As a Christian, I'm not supposed to be consumed with the shadows and the types, but with the substance who is Jesus Christ. It is not that I disregard the shadows and the types, because they help me to have a better and deeper understanding of the substance. This Christ-centered approach to scripture is refreshing and brings to life aspects of scripture that at one time seemed inaccessible. I praise Goldsworthy for this aspect of his book.

The other area that I commend Goldsworthy on is his inclusion of a practical section on the "where" of Biblical theology. So often, the study of theology can become a purely academic exercise that never really translates over into real life. By including the practical section as the end, Goldsworthy helps the reader put into the practice the method of Biblical theology. This not only helps the reader in understanding the process, but it also helps the reader come to understand how other Biblical theologians write books on various topics and their relationship to the big picture of Biblical theology. It gives the reader a sense of the value of Biblical theology in the interpretation and application of the scriptures.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I found Graeme Goldsworthy's book *According to Plan* to be extremely profitable in helping me to understand the big picture of scripture. I have every intention of

recommending and even using this work in the context of my local church. It is clear, concise, and thoroughly Bible-saturated. It presents Christ as the rightful Lord to which all scripture attest.