

**IX** 9Marks BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

# BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

HOW  
THE CHURCH  
FAITHFULLY  
TEACHES THE  
GOSPEL



**NICK ROARK & ROBERT CLINE**

“This little book packs a big punch. Absorb its contents, and feel its effect for years to come.”

**Constantine R. Campbell**, Associate Professor of New Testament,  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Faithful preaching and teaching not only zooms in on a particular text but also zooms out and considers the storyline of the whole Bible. Nick Roark and Robert Cline show how biblical theology is essential for the church, for preaching, and for living. They survey the big picture of the Scriptures and show us some wrong turns that are commonly made. A very helpful resource for pastors, teachers, and laypeople.”

**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of  
New Testament Interpretation and Professor of Biblical Theology,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“I love biblical theology, but I don’t always love biblical theology books. Too often, they are so technically written that they miss the majority of believers. This book is an exception. The authors not only define, defend, and describe biblical theology but also do so in a way that is accessible to all believers. This book is simple while addressing complex ideas, short but packed with information, and theoretical yet filled with practical examples of doing biblical theology. It is both a call to do biblical theology and a handbook for doing it well. I finished it with a deeper desire to see Jesus in the Word and to help my church members do the same.”

**Chuck Lawless**, Dean of Doctoral Studies and Vice President for  
Spiritual Formation, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary;  
author, *Spiritual Warfare: Biblical Truth for Victory* and *Putting on  
the Armor*

“There is not a single effective biblical expositor today who does not employ biblical theology to make sense of his text and to deliver its Christ-centered message. Roark and Cline explain in a very clear and direct way how biblical theology helps the church and pastors to understand and proclaim the big story from Scriptures.”

**Augustus Lopes**, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Goiânia, Brazil

“Wow—this short book bundles a library of wisdom for grasping God’s biblical storyline and faithfully teaching the Word! The authors have done us all a great favor by distilling heavy biblical concepts and making them simple, user-friendly, and transferable. This is the kind of book you want to hand out to a Sunday school teacher, an aspiring pastor, or a missionary candidate. Well-meaning Bible teachers often take the easy path of proof texting to make a ‘practical lesson,’ but miss the larger theme, the glorious centerpiece of the passage. A wonderful tool for keeping me on track as a missionary and for teaching new converts how to study and teach the Word, this small book should be translated into many languages!”

**David L. Frazier**, Executive Director, Equipping Servants International; author, *Mission Smart*

“This brief book explains important theological concepts in a clear, faithful, simple way. It is perfect for those in the church who might find an in-depth academic book a challenge, but who want to understand sound theology and grasp the biblical concepts needed in order to teach the gospel well. This is an excellent resource, and I can’t wait to recommend it to my women’s ministry team.”

**Abi Byrd**, former missionary to the Balkans; Bible Instructor, The Simeon Trust; Deacon of Women’s Ministry, Loudoun Valley Baptist Church, Purcellville, Virginia

“A believer is measured by faithfulness, and it is imperative that a believer know how to be faithful to the Word of God, our one timeless authority. Through explanation and example, Nick and Robert’s book simply and helpfully instructs believers on how to rightly understand individual biblical passages while always keeping in mind the big picture that Christ is the goal and end of all Scripture. I highly recommend it as an invaluable companion for any believer desiring to hear the words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’”

**Ndagi Job Goshi**, international bivocational church planter

“Biblical theology is a frequently ignored subject, despite being indispensable to understanding the entire Bible. The authors of this excellent book realize the importance of this topic for comprehending the storyline of redemptive history. If you are looking for a resource that explains and applies biblical theology well, this is your book. It is biblical, well written, easy to understand, practical, brief yet not superficial, full of information, and extremely helpful for preaching and pastoral ministry. I’m amazed at how much solid instruction was put into such a short book.”

**Miguel Núñez**, Senior Pastor, International Baptist Church of Santo Domingo; President and Founder, Wisdom and Integrity Ministries

"As an elder of a church located in one of the major global crossroads of the world, I long to equip Christians who will return to challenging places where they often face persecution and false teaching. Biblical theology is a critical tool to help Christians protect and proclaim the gospel. I am immensely grateful for this book and excited to see it used to strengthen the global church. It strikes the perfect balance of breadth and depth, easily translates across cultural and language backgrounds, and will help all Christians better see, celebrate, and communicate the gospel."

**Andrew Gizinski**, Elder, RAK Evangelical Church, Ras Al Khaimah,  
United Arab Emirates

"Nick and Robert have accomplished something rare in a field this broad. They have succinctly clarified the core of biblical theology without oversimplifying the process. Every Christian will benefit from the numerous examples of how an informed biblical theology transforms how we read, apply, and teach the Bible. This is a trustworthy map down the Emmaus road, where the discovery of Christ in all the Scriptures delights the heart."

**Chip Bugnar**, author, *Grace beyond the Veil*

"In this book full of powerful, illuminating illustrations, Roark and Cline argue convincingly that seeing how the storyline of the Bible is all about Jesus Christ equips every believer to serve him in line with the purpose of God. Read this book and see for yourself! The phrase *biblical theology* may give you the impression that this is a textbook only for Bible colleges or pastoral training. But here is a must-read book for every Christian because we are all meant to be stewards of the church of Christ."

**Conrad Mbewe**, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church; Chancellor,  
The African Christian University, Lusaka, Zambia

"Trying to put together the various historical epochs and literary genres of the sixty-six books of Scripture into one consistent whole can seem like a daunting task. In this eminently readable and practical book, Roark and Cline help us to see that this difficult task might not be so hard after all; for, as Jesus says, all Scripture points to him. The authors are to be commended for writing a book to help Bible teacher and student alike to understand the point of God's Word and protect us from applying it in wrong ways to our lives and our churches."

**Shawn D. Wright**, Professor of Church History, The Southern Baptist  
Theological Seminary; Pastor of Leadership Development, Clifton  
Baptist Church, Louisville

"As a pastor I'm often asked for a brief book that provides the Bible's storyline and unity, centered on the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. From now on, this book is my answer. But this work does more than describe biblical theology; it shows the reader how this often neglected discipline can guard us against numerous errors—in both our interpretation of Scripture and the practice of the church."

**Lee Tankersley**, Pastor, Cornerstone Community Church, Jackson, Tennessee

"I have been on the lookout for a book on biblical theology that I could confidently hand to any person in my church. I have finally found it. This book is an answer to prayer."

**Jason Meyer**, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

## **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

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BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

# BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

HOW  
THE CHURCH  
FAITHFULLY  
TEACHES  
THE GOSPEL

NICK ROARK AND ROBERT CLINE

 **CROSSWAY®**

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To the saints  
of Franconia Baptist Church.  
By God's grace, may we adore and proclaim  
Christ from all the Scriptures.



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# SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

9Marks plans to produce a short, readable book on each of what Mark has called nine marks of a healthy church, plus a few more on sound doctrine, prayer, and missions. Watch for books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, and church leadership.

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with

*Series Preface*

God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,  
*Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman*  
series editors

# THE NEED FOR BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

## SEEING THE POINT OF THE STORY

When I (Nick) was in elementary school, one of my classmates gave a book report about a story written by C. S. Lewis featuring four children, a lion king, a white witch, and a hidden magical land accessed through a wardrobe. I was mesmerized. So I purchased *The Chronicles of Narnia* for myself and read them with pleasure. But years later, after my conversion to Christ, I realized I had been missing the author's obvious intentions to point his readers to Jesus.

It's possible to read a story, find it interesting, and entirely miss its point. You might focus too much on the scenery or the minor characters. You might read only paragraphs at a time, or aimlessly skip from one place to another. You might even try to cobble together the story's plot or worldview from a variety of disconnected sections. If you do any of these things, it's more than likely you'll misunderstand the story, both its hero and its major themes.

The Bible is a divinely inspired story. It tells its story



## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

though a collection of stories, songs, poetry, wisdom sayings, Gospels, letters, and apocalyptic literature. Together, these various forms tell a true story about God's saving work in history. The Bible contains sixty-six books written by a variety of authors. These authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit, who used their unique personalities and contexts to create for us the canon of Scripture, with its single main point and plot line.

Christians recognize the Bible's divine authority. They even read and study it daily for years. And yet, many still miss the point. Jesus addresses some people like this in John 5:39–40: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”

It's possible to honor the Scriptures yet read and use them incorrectly by failing to see the big picture God has designed. Thankfully, though, the Bible's author left us some clear clues about the point of his story. Here's one major clue from Jesus Christ himself:

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:44–49)

Jesus explains two things in this text. First, he makes the shocking statement that all of the Old Testament—from the Pentateuch to the Prophets to the Psalms—was actually written about him; in other words, Jesus identifies himself as the promised Messiah. Second, he says that his followers will be witnesses of these things to all nations, that is, to all peoples in all places.

Simply put, you won't understand the story of the Bible unless you see that *it's all about Jesus!* From Genesis to Revelation, Jesus is the Hero and the point of the story. What's more, you won't understand who Jesus is unless you understand the larger story that's all about him! Jesus is the interpretative key to the Bible, which means a careful Bible reader will find him in the beginning, middle, and end of this story.

God has revealed for us in the Bible the King's purposes, the King's plans, and the King's promises. As they're worked out in history, we need to pay attention to this story and read it as Jesus says we should. God's story is a grand story—the grandest of them all, in fact—and it's centered on his plan of redemption in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

But to read the Bible faithfully, we need the proper tools. The discipline of biblical theology is one of those helpful tools.

1. *Biblical theology helps clarify the Bible's main purpose.* Some people approach God's Word as if it were a collection of independent stories, or an assortment of advice and counsel, or even a universal cookbook with recipes for "the good life" scattered across its sixty-six books. But these approaches fail to bring to light the central purpose of Scripture.

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In the Bible, the triune God explains who he is and what he is like and how he's at work throughout history by his Spirit and in his Son, Jesus Christ the King, and how we ought to glorify him in this world. Biblical theology helps us to grasp this main purpose by looking at each passage of Scripture in light of the whole Bible so that we understand how every part of Scripture is related to Jesus.

2. *Biblical theology helps guard and guide the church.* Reading Scripture rightly means knowing where each book fits into its overarching narrative. And knowing the overarching narrative helps us read and understand accurately each event, character, or lesson that's been given to us as part of God's progressively revealed Word. Understanding the whole story of Scripture clarifies who Jesus Christ is and what his gospel is.

God has promised to rescue a people from every tribe and nation and tongue for his own glory through his Son and by his Spirit. These redeemed people are members of Christ's body, the church. What is the church of Jesus Christ supposed to be and supposed to do? Jesus said to his followers—those who've repented of their sins and trusted in him alone—that the Scriptures testify “repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). So the proclamation of Jesus Christ ought to be at the heart of the church's mission to disciple the nations. In this way, biblical theology guards the church from the deadly error of proclaiming a false gospel and guides the church toward keeping the proclamation of the true gospel as the centerpiece of its mission to the world for the praise of God's glory.

3. *Biblical theology helps us in our evangelistic outreach.* Sharing the good news with those who are unfamiliar with Christianity requires explaining much more than “four spiritual laws” or the “Romans road.” People first need to grasp that the Christian worldview accompanies a total transformation of mind-set. In our evangelism, we must start with God and creation to see what’s gone wrong. From there, we’re able to follow what God has been doing throughout history, which will help us discover why he sent Jesus and why that matters today. Not until we rightly understand these past events in their proper contexts will we be equipped to uncover what God is doing right now and what he’ll do in the future.

4. *Biblical theology helps us read, understand, and teach the Bible the way Jesus said we should.* Jesus himself says in Luke 24 that he is Scripture’s interpretive key. So if we fail to read and understand Scripture in a way that leads us to Jesus, then we will miss the point of the Bible, and as a result we will teach others to commit the same error.

## **WHEN CHURCHES MISS THE POINT**

The bottom line is this: missing the point of the Bible’s story produces false gospels and false churches. Let’s consider a few examples of this kind of error that biblical theology helps us to avoid.

### **The Prosperity-Gospel Church**

Let us introduce you to Jonathan. He reads his Bible daily and prays often but has never read through a complete book of the

## **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

Bible. Look in his Bible and you'll find circled verses in the Old Testament and underlined pages in the New.

His wife, Rebekah, has memorized quite an impressive array of Bible verses and is teaching these verses to her children, one by one. Jonathan, Rebekah, and their young family are part of a local church in their city in Africa (though this could be Asia, Europe, or America, for that matter). When I asked to hear some of Rebekah's memorized verses, she recited Mark 11:24: "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Then she said, "That's what Abraham did, so that's what I do."

A bit disturbed, I (Robert) decided to reach out to one of her pastors. When I asked him what he thought the main message the Bible might be, he said: "Oh, that's easy. God sent Jesus to give the abundant life by faith to all who believe. God will give us this life now with all the riches and blessings that Jesus deserves if only we have faith. We can create our own blessings, when we pray in faith like Abraham did."

### **The Civil-Gospel Church**

Visiting some believers in another city, this time in the United States, I (Robert) asked them to tell me what the message of the Bible is. Their answers went something like this:

Well, America is a Christian nation, God's chosen nation like Israel, a city on a hill. God has blessed this nation, but like it says in 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

They continued:

God and country, that's what my church is all about. This is supposed to be a Christian nation, but now we're told we can't have the Ten Commandments on the walls of our public schools! If Americans would just be good, moral people like Abraham, Moses, or David, then we'd all prosper and enjoy the safety and comfort of God's blessing.

### **The Soup-Kitchen Church**

John has recently moved to the city and is part of a network of churches aimed at serving the poor. His primary job is managing a food bank. John's church desires to obey the Bible's command to seek justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God (Mic. 6:8). John admits that the "accent" of his church's teaching is definitely more about mobilizing for what we should do for God than about the message of what God has done for us in Christ. "We ought to be all about relieving suffering wherever we are," John says. "Feeding 'the least of these' is what we're known for as a church. What could possibly be wrong with that?"

### **The Immorality-Affirming Church**

Fundamentally, biblical theology assists faithful Christ followers in recognizing and refuting erroneous interpretations of Scripture that conflict with the overall narrative of the Bible. Cynthia is a young college student from a Christian home. She's always been taught the Bible and knows its big-picture story well. She has even completed a year's worth of New Testament Greek studies. Her worldview is solidly Christian, but

## **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

lately she's been confused as she meets professing Christians who are openly gay and also very kind, generous, and loving.

"How could the Bible be against such people?" she wonders.

She's read articles by biblical scholars who question the English translation of key texts traditionally used to explain why homosexual practice is sinful. At this point, she can't help but ask, "Since there are no verses in the Bible explicitly forbidding same-sex marriage, what if two women really love each other?"

## **CONCLUSION**

These are but a few problems biblical theology will help Christians and local churches address. There are others as well. As this book progresses, we'll see how biblical theology helps us get the story right by putting King Jesus at the start, in the center, and at the end of the Bible's one true story.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's begin by answering the question, What is biblical theology?

# **IX** 9Marks

## **Building Healthy Churches**

**9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.**

**To that end, we want to see churches characterized by these nine marks of health:**

- 1 Expository Preaching**
- 2 Biblical Theology**
- 3 A Biblical Understanding of the Gospel**
- 4 A Biblical Understanding of Conversion**
- 5 A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism**
- 6 Biblical Church Membership**
- 7 Biblical Church Discipline**
- 8 Biblical Discipleship**
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## HOW DOES THE CHURCH GUARD AGAINST FALSE GOSPELS?

Every week, many churches around the world read the Bible but miss the main point—and end up teaching false gospels week in and week out. One of the most important safeguards against this danger is an understanding of biblical theology: reading the Bible in light of its main message, culminating in Jesus Christ.

Starting with a framework for understanding the storyline of the Bible and then explaining basic principles for prioritizing the teaching of this message, this book aims to help churches guard the truth of the gospel.

“If you are looking for a resource that explains and applies biblical theology well, this is your book. I’m amazed at how much solid instruction was put into such a short book.”

**MIGUEL NÚÑEZ**, Senior Pastor, International Baptist Church of Santo Domingo

“A very helpful resource for pastors, teachers, and laypeople.”

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**CONRAD MBEWE**, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church; Chancellor, The African Christian University, Lusaka, Zambia

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*\*This volume is part of the 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches series.*

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