

An Interview with Vern Poythress on the History of Salvation

from the [Beginning with Moses Blog](#)

Dr Poythress, thank you for your excellent ‘Survey of the History of Salvation’ in the [ESV Study Bible](#), and also for the chance to ask you some questions.

1. In your essay you raise the issue of the Bible’s unifying thread. You suggest that one unifying thread is the divine authorship of each book. What would you say are the other main unifying threads, and do you think there is any one main category or concept which stands out as more foundational than the others?

In one way the divine authorship of each book is the most basic unifying thread, because it is what produces all the others. In addition, the comprehensive unity to the Bible derives from the unity of God’s mind and his plan. But there are many subordinate unifying threads: salvation through Christ, foreshadowed in the OT; promise and fulfillment; the consistency of God’s character, including his love, mercy, justice, omniscience, sovereignty, and truthfulness; the presence of sin and the struggle against it; judgment on wickedness and reward for righteousness; the theme of deliverance; covenant; mediators; God’s presence, especially in theophany, tabernacle, and temple; sacrifice; communion with God; the word of God; death and resurrection; wisdom from God; faith, love, and hope; justification and sanctification.

The editors of the [ESV Study Bible](#) asked me to write about the history of salvation, not only because it is an important unity, but because it is sometimes neglected or misunderstood. We now have before us the complete Bible, but God caused the books within it to be written over a period of centuries, during which he was speaking and working in preparation for the coming of Christ. We need to take into account how God works out his plan of salvation in successive stages. The theme of promise and fulfillment, and especially of fulfillment in Christ, is very important for enriching our understanding of what God is saying and doing in the OT. We could also mention the themes of covenant, of mediators (prophets, kings, and priests), and of type and antitype. These themes help us both to understand the theological and Christocentric unity of the whole Bible and to understand in what ways God unfolds his work gradually. OT readers could grasp the fundamental meaning of animal sacrifice, and how it looked forward to a final sacrifice for sins. But they did not understand all the details of Christ’s work. We look back on his completed work, and from this later vantage point, aided by explicit teaching in the NT, we have the privilege of understanding more deeply than OT saints did.

2. Two leading contenders for keys to the Bible’s unity are covenant, and the kingdom of God. Do you think either of these is more dominant, and how would you express the relationship between covenant and kingdom?

The Bible is so rich that we can begin to uncover riches no matter where we start. Covenant and kingdom of God are both fruitful starting points. But people have used these two expressions in more than one way, because they can discover within the Bible riches at more than one level.

For example, “covenant” can be used for the specific agreements or verbal compacts that God makes with particular people, like Noah, Abraham, and David. The same term “covenant” can also be used in modern discussion in a generalizing way, to talk about the unifying patterns that

characterize all God's relations with human beings, not simply those that the Bible happens to call a "covenant." I think these two viewpoints can be treated as perspectives on one another. The particularities of God's care for Abraham, and his promises to Abraham, are pertinent to us who through Christ have become Abraham's sons ([Gal. 3:7, 29](#)). The particularities become a window or perspective through which God enables us to see the general pattern of the new covenant ([2 Corinthians 3](#)) and what has been called "the covenant of grace." The "covenant of grace" is a label for the one way of salvation through faith in Christ, as that one way is worked out through the whole of history, and it designates the consistent pattern of relationship between God and man that this one way of salvation includes.

"Kingdom of God" can also be used in more than one way. It may describe God's universal rule over the whole world, from beginning to end: "The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and *his kingdom* rules over all" ([Ps. 103:19](#)). Or, more narrowly, it may focus on Jesus' announcement of the coming of the kingdom of God such as was promised in the OT. The expression may then describe the climactic acts that the OT predicts, when God acts in power to bring salvation, especially through the death, resurrection, ascension, and on-going rule of Christ at God's right hand ([Eph. 1:21–22](#)). These different meanings can become perspectives on one another. Christ's resurrection from the dead is one particular instance of God's sovereignty, a sovereignty that he displays everywhere and through all time. But it is a climactic instance that throws light on all the rest. God always exercises his sovereignty through the Son, and on behalf of the Son ([Heb. 1:3](#); [John 13:31–32](#)). The whole of history is moving forward to a time of glorification when Christ will be seen in his central role ([Rev. 21:22–22:5](#)).

When we think of either "covenant" or "kingdom of God" in its broadest sense, the concept is broad enough to include nearly everything within its scope. The word "covenant" typically focuses on God's relation to human beings. But if we desire we can expand our idea of "covenant" to include God's relation with the whole of his creation ([Jer. 33:20](#)), as long as we remember that mankind plays a central role with the created order. Covenant is the means through which God works out his kingly purposes and establishes the climactic phase of his rule. So covenant is part of kingdom. Conversely, God exerts his rule on behalf of his people, for the glory of Christ who is head of his people. So kingdom exists for the sake of Christ, who is the heart of the covenant ([Isa. 42:6](#); [49:8](#)). Either one of these can be viewed as "dominant," if we enrich its meaning sufficiently.

3. How would you describe the relationship between the unconditionality / conditionality of the covenants in the Bible, and what difference should this understanding make to our Bible reading as we come across the various covenants in the text?

One of the challenges with respect to understanding covenants is that there is more than one particular covenant in the Bible. We must be careful to study the particularities of each covenant, as well as to see lessons with respect to the general pattern (an overall covenant of grace). For example, God makes a covenant with Noah after the flood, in [Gen. 9:1–17](#). It includes Noah's descendants ([9:9](#)). God makes a promise not to bring another flood to destroy the earth, and gives the rainbow as a sign. The promise is valid for all Noah's descendants. In the ordinary sense, this is an "unconditional" covenant. There is no extra condition, no "if" clause. God does *not* say, "I promise this *only if* your descendants obey me." Similarly, we can find no obvious added conditions when God promises to Abraham that he will bring the Israelites out of Egypt ([Gen. 15:13–16](#)). On the other hand, in the covenant of circumcision in [Genesis 17](#), there is a kind of "condition": someone

who is uncircumcised “shall be cut off from his people” ([17:14](#)). So circumcision is a kind of “condition” for Abraham’s descendants. In Deuteronomy, as part of the covenantal relation between God and Israel, God requires that Israel remain faithful to him, and threatens to put them into exile if they persistently disobey ([Deuteronomy 28](#)). Their obedience is a “condition” for remaining in the land.

Many people are most interested in what to think about God’s promises of final salvation through Christ. These promises are most fully articulated in the NT, and are associated with the new covenant. The promises always come in relation to Christ, who is both God and man ([Heb. 1:3; 2:11, 14](#)). As man, Christ was required to trust in God the Father and to obey the Father’s will. These requirements for Christ were, in a sense, “conditions.” Apart from his trust and his obedience, no one would have been saved. At the same time, because Christ is God, and because God promised in the OT that he would infallibly accomplish salvation ([Isa. 42:3–4](#)), Christ’s obedience was guaranteed. That does not make his obedience easy or trivial. Remember how he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Hebrews comments on the deep reality of his obedient suffering: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered” ([Heb. 5:7–8](#)). Salvation involved a “condition,” that is, Christ’s suffering and obedience. These had to take place if we were to be saved. At the same time, God through his prophetic word unconditionally guaranteed that Christ would meet the conditions!

Since Christ is fully man, God as God had a relationship to Christ the man, and this relationship between God and the man was, in the general sense, “covenantal.” God on his part made commitments to Christ in his OT promises. Christ, in his earthly life, committed himself to following the Father’s way. This covenant between God and Christ was both “conditional”—involving the necessity of Christ’s obedience—and “unconditional”—guaranteed by God. So the words “conditional” and “unconditional” must be used with care. We have to ask ourselves not only which covenantal relation we are discussing, but what aspect of that relation.

When we turn to God’s promises of final salvation to us, they are based on Christ. These promises are secure, because Christ has accomplished full salvation, not merely the possibility of salvation: “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” ([John 6:54](#)). “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” ([John 6:39–40](#)). “My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” ([John 10:29](#)). Thus, we can say that when we believe in Christ, we are “unconditionally” saved. But then is belief in Christ a kind of condition? Clearly it is. And belief means really trusting in Christ, not merely mouthing words in which we verbally say that we are trusting. Belief is itself a product of God’s prior purpose for us: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day” ([John 6:44](#)).

Some people have postulated that God’s initiative in choosing us and “drawing” us goes back ultimately to his foreseeing our future faith. But this order reverses the order of the Bible. This reversal says, in effect, “as many as believed were appointed by God to eternal life.” But the Bible says the opposite: “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed” ([Acts 13:48](#)). God’s appointment, that is, his choosing us to be saved, is unconditional. It does not depend on our belief or on anything in us. “What do you have that you did not receive?” ([1 Cor. 4:7](#)). But when God

draws us to Christ, he provides everything that we need, both faith and the power for new living in fellowship with Christ. Faith and new, holy living are both indispensable parts of the Christian life. They are “conditions” in this sense. But God undertakes through Christ to work in us; Christ’s own power is the guarantee that we will continue: “. . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who *works in you*, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” ([Phil. 2:12–13](#)).

We should also say that joining the church brings a person into a kind of covenantal relationship with God, since the person makes promises to God at the time of his baptism. But being baptized does not guarantee that a person is eternally saved. The Bible frankly described the possibility and the reality of apostasy—some people fall away from a faith that they earlier professed: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us” ([1 John 2:19](#)). The “going out” describes apostasy, falling away from the Christian community, the church. Apostasy is like a negative condition. If you are to be saved, you must not apostasize. But this teaching is not inconsistent with the security of salvation for those who trust in Christ. First John says, “They were not of us.” Apostasy reveals openly what was true even beforehand: that the apostate heart was never set on genuinely trusting in Christ in the first place.

A short summary might say that the instances of unconditional promises in the OT anticipate the security that God gives us when he guarantees eternal salvation in Christ. The instances of conditions in the OT anticipate both the necessity of Christ’s own obedience, and the reality that when God works salvation in us, he brings about obedience in us. This working in us is part of the total process of salvation.

4. Your essay provides a very helpful explanation of one aspect of the covenant promises—the promise of offspring to Abraham. The are also specific promises to Abraham about land, and concerning God’s rule or blessing. Could you tease out the biblical theology of these two facets just as you have done for the ‘offspring’ theme?

[Galatians 3:7](#) indicates that those who believe in Christ are “the sons of Abraham.” That is an instance of the theme of offspring. Christ is the principal offspring of Abraham, according to [Gal. 3:16](#). And then when we trust in Christ, we are united with him, and we receive what he has accomplished for us. Since he is Abraham’s offspring, we are too. Since he receives “the blessing of Abraham” ([Gal. 3:8, 14](#)), we do too. Since he is an heir of Abraham, we are too: “And if you are Christ’s then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” ([Gal. 3:29](#)).

The language of inheritance in Galatians has a close relation to God’s giving of the land of Palestine to Abraham. The land was inherited by his descendants, and passed down from father to son. The passing down goes all the way down the genealogical lines until it comes to Christ, who inherits everything: “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him” ([2 Cor. 1:20](#)). Christ inherits not only Palestine, but the whole earth, of which Palestine was a type or shadow: “All authority in heaven and on *earth* has been given to me” ([Matt. 28:18](#)). Therefore, we who belong to Christ inherit the earth: “For all things are *yours*, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or *the world* or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s” ([1 Cor. 3:21–23](#)). Thus, those who belong to Christ inherit with him—both the status of being sons, inheritance of the land, and fullness of blessings.

Are these blessings only “spiritual”? Abraham himself came to understand that the blessings

of fellowship with God were eternal, and were not exhausted by merely temporary material blessings:

“These [including Abraham] all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.” ([Heb. 11:13–16](#))

We too look forward to the same city, the heavenly Jerusalem, which comes down to the earth and so includes the dimension of physicality, and includes a physical resurrection in a new heaven and new *earth* ([Rev. 21:1–2](#)). While we are in this life, we will have tribulation—as did Abraham ([Acts 14:22](#)).

In sum, we can say that through Christ the Israelite we inherit the land and all its blessings, which are ultimately tokens of God’s favor. But we must wait patiently and suffer in this life, looking forward to possessing that full inheritance and the fullness of blessings in the new earth.

5. You also have some excellent material on Christ in the OT, and Christ as Mediator. What practical difference should a passage like [Luke 24:25–27](#) have on our reading of the OT? For instance, does it mean that we should try to discern in every single OT passage lines of connection to Christ? Can you give some guidance here on when, where and why Christological connections are valid?

The theme of mediation in the OT is one of the most important aids to seeing how Christ is there in the OT. In the OT, God was holy and the people were sinful. A major difficulty! How can God meet sinful people without destroying them? (The question is pointedly exemplified in [Ex. 33:20](#).) Only through Christ. So *all* God’s relations to people after the Fall depend on Christ. We know that the principle of Christ’s mediation is true theologically, even when the text does not explicitly mention the difficulty created by sin. The necessity for Christ’s mediation in God’s relations in the OT gives us a good start in understanding the OT Christologically. And then there are specific persons and institutions that function in a mediatorial role, such as prophets, kings, the tabernacle, the temple, the altar, and the sacrifices.

In addition to this principle of mediation, I think there are several other helps to guide our understanding of the OT. (Our ultimate help is of course the Holy Spirit.) First, what we find in any one passage of the Bible should be consistent with what the Bible teaches elsewhere. The most important check on our ideas is Scripture itself. Whenever the NT quotes from the OT to show a connection to Christ, we have an important starting point for our own reading of the OT. Something that we think may be hinted at in one passage should be checked out by what Scripture teaches clearly in other places. The Bible alone has infallible authority. Both our own ideas and the ideas of others have to be sifted by the Bible as our standard.

Second, the Bible shows the progressive character of revelation. What was promised in the OT is spoken of more fully and openly in the NT ([Eph. 3:4–6](#); [Heb. 1:1–3](#)). So we should not be finding in the OT any fundamentally new teaching that is not found in the NT.

Third, we need to pay attention to the immediate context of a passage, as well as the context of the whole Bible. Do not just look at a single word, or a single verse, but ask how what is said at one point fits into the context of God's relation to Israel, and into his whole plan. As a negative example, consider the proposal that any time we find a tree or wood in the OT, it points to the cross. Is that right? We do believe that Christ died on a cross, and the truth about the cross must be connected with the OT. But we can also feel a certain arbitrariness in just drawing a line directly from the cross to wood. Why? Because we should be asking what *role* wood plays in its context.

The beams of the tabernacle were made of acacia wood ([Ex. 26:15–30](#)). That is not wood in the role of execution (the cross), but wood in the role of holding things up and giving them firm structure. I believe that the tabernacle is related symbolically to the OT picture in which God the Creator builds the whole world as his large-scale house ([Ps. 104:2](#); [Amos 9:6](#)). It points then to God's wisdom as builder, and to his own firmness and faithfulness, which is behind the stability of our world order. At the same time, the tabernacle offers us that same wisdom and faithfulness and stability when we approach God for forgiveness and fellowship, in the context of our need for redemption. The stable structure of the tabernacle points to Christ as the wisdom of God ([Col. 2:3](#)), who is faithful and who gives us stable forgiveness. "He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he *always* lives to make intercession for them" ([Heb. 7:25](#)). And of course the tabernacle points forward to Christ's body, which is the final tabernacle ([John 2:19](#)), which God "built up" again in the resurrection.

Fourth, we should be open for God to teach us in ways that surprise us and convict us. If you are just finding the same thing in the Bible every time that you read about wood, you are not really learning anything new, and you are not open to the transforming things you will find when you really listen carefully, paying attention to the context and asking God to teach you.

Fifth, we should pay attention to the body of Christ. Suppose that you see some new idea as you are thinking about the acacia wood in the tabernacle. Can you share your new idea with other members of the body, so that they can profit? For them to profit, you have to be able to some extent to "connect the dots." With acacia wood and the cross, other people are not going to be able to see the connection, because you can't produce a step-by-step path. It seems arbitrary (other than the fact that both are wood). If, on the other hand, you go from the tabernacle to Christ's body, or from the tabernacle to Christ's wisdom, you have a way of showing others that your ideas come from the Bible itself. Other people's confirmation of your ideas is important, because none of us is infallible. In this connection, humility is important. Do not get enamored with your own cleverness!

It is not fashionable nowadays, but I confess that I do believe that every passage, and even every word, of the OT reflects Christ. At a minimum, we expect it to be so because Christ is God. God is three Persons, and all three Persons are present whenever God speaks in the OT. So Christ is present. Moreover, God's speaking in the OT is *mediated* speaking. It must be, or else we as sinners would die as a result of hearing him. In addition, [John 1:1](#) identifies Christ as the eternal Word, by whom all things were made. The Word is the source of order for the whole of creation, including the order of language, even down to its details. But I hope that these observations of mine are the opposite of arbitrariness. I am intending to suggest paths that the Bible itself opens for us for our meditation.

6. Calvin says in *Institutes* II.x.2 that the Jews 'had and knew Christ as Mediator, through whom they were joined to God and share in his promises'. You suggest that 'The instances of salvation in the OT all depend on Christ'. Could you explain how Christ was Saviour of

the OT saints, and whether you understand this in the same sense as Calvin, i.e. the Jews actually knowing Christ?

I agree with what Calvin said. Christ was presented to OT saints both through God's promises of future salvation and through types (shadows) that prefigured his work, such as animal sacrifices, priests, the exodus, and other instances of deliverance. And even when Christ is not directly mentioned, God reckoned with Christ's work when he forgave OT saints and when he blessed them in spite of their failings. The benefits of Christ's mediation were already being made available. The saints in the OT had faith in Christ as the coming climactic deliverer. But they knew less about him that we can know now when we look back on his completed redemption.

7. For someone coming to biblical theology from a world strongly oriented to systematic theology, how would you explain the differences and the relationship between the two disciplines?

Different people have had different conceptions of both biblical theology and systematic theology, so it is wise to ask what people mean in both areas, as well as to look at the relation between the two areas. I would myself describe systematic theology as study of the Bible's teaching in which we try to synthesize and then summarize what the Bible as a whole teaches about all kinds of *topics*—God, man, Christ, sin, salvation, and so on.

In some contexts the expression "biblical theology" simply means theology built on the Bible; that is, it is systematic theology done in the right way. But there is also another possible meaning. Biblical theology, as described by Geerhardus Vos, studies the Bible with a focus on its *history*, the history of revelation and of redemption. Whereas systematic theology is *topically* organized, biblical theology is *historically* organized. It looks at the progress of God's work and his revelation through *time*. In addition, biblical theology more broadly conceived can study the themes that are distinctive to a particular book of the Bible, or to books written by a single human author (for example, Paul's letters).

At their best, biblical theology and systematic theology interact and help to deepen one another. Systematic theology provides doctrines of God's sovereignty, of revelation, of God's purposes, and of the meaning of history that supply a sound framework of assumptions for the work of biblical theology. Biblical theology at its best deepens the appreciation that systematic theology should have for the way in which, in interpreting individual texts and in uncovering their relation to a whole topic, the context of texts within the history of redemption colors the interpretation. Biblical theology may also bring to light new themes that can be the starting point for systematic-theological explorations into new topics that can receive fuller attention. For instance, the theme of life and death as it develops in the course of the history of revelation can become the starting point for discussing ethical questions about modern medicine and the issue of euthanasia.

8. Can you comment on what you think the main dangers are in reading the Bible without a grasp of its big picture?

If we do not think deeply about the big picture that the Bible provides, we are likely in practice either not to think about big pictures at all, or to take our big picture directly from some modern worldview like evolutionary naturalism. And then that corrupts our understanding of the Bible.

Even if we do not think about big pictures at all, it does leave us vulnerable to being influenced in a “subterranean” way by modern worldviews. For example, the knowledge industry (media, education, advertising) in modern America is in some ways very materialistic. According to one dominant view, life is about wealth and power and pleasure. God and angels and demons are irrelevant. You don’t have to think explicitly about philosophy in order to be influenced by this atmosphere. Then, without knowing it, you come to the Bible with expectations that are colored by your modern environment. You misread the significance of some of what you read, or you are prejudiced without knowing it about some of the Bible’s claims about the spirit world and about what really matters.

The same goes for the “big picture” that we use with respect to the meaning of history. Does history go on and on until the human race simply dies out or is evolutionarily transmuted into some higher form of animal, as evolutionary naturalism would claim? Or does it culminate in the Second Coming of Christ? It makes a difference as to what kind of world you think you live in. And can a single event in history, namely the resurrection of Christ, have redemptive effects on people who are far separated from it in time? The Bible says yes, but modern rationalistic thinking about history says no.

9. Can you tell us about the biggest influences on your own grasp of Scripture’s coherence? What would feature on your essential reading list here, and why?

My outstanding mentor in understanding the history of salvation was Edmund P. Clowney. He has now gone to be with the Lord, but his books are still a great help, because they articulate the Christocentric character of all of the Bible. I think of [*Preaching and Biblical Theology*](#) (Eerdmans, 1961), [*The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the OT*](#) (NavPress, 1988); [*Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*](#) (Crossway, 2003), and [*The Church*](#) (InterVarsity Press, 1995). Then there are major works in biblical theology: Geerhardus Vos, [*Biblical Theology*](#) (Eerdmans, 1948); O. Palmer Robertson, [*The Christ of the Covenants*](#) (Baker, 1980); Herman Ridderbos, [*The Coming of the Kingdom*](#) (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962); Richard B. Gaffin Jr., [*Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology*](#) (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987).

I think that systematic theology, as well as biblical theology, contributes to our appreciation of the unity of the Bible. Even before going to seminary, I was influenced by John Calvin, [*Institutes of the Christian Religion*](#), and by systematic thinkers like J.I. Packer ([*Knowing God*](#), [*Fundamentalism and the Word of God*](#), and [*Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*](#)). My whole time studying at Westminster Theological Seminary further deepened my understanding of Scripture’s coherence.