

Systematic and Biblical Theology

Systematic theology is not a system of theology that determines our interpretation of Scripture. Contrary to what many theologians believe and teach today, it does *not* force square pegs into round holes just to keep the “system” consistent. That would presume that such a system is independent of Scripture, pre-conceived in its notions, and that Scripture is adapted to fit the system. That presumption is false. I don’t know what it would be, but it is not systematic theology. Systematic theology is derived from the bible, not imposed on it.

Systematic theology asks what the whole bible teaches us about a given topic. Those topics are derived from the bible itself. Systematic theology presumes that the bible is consistent, coherent, complete, and unchanging. God’s plan of salvation does not adjust from Genesis to Revelation; instead, it is progressively revealed from Genesis to Revelation. Only with such a presumption can the whole bible be brought to bear on a given topic.

Biblical theology is not a system of theology that controls our interpretation of Scripture either. Nor does it preclude systematic theology, contrary to what many theologians believe and teach today. These two approaches to biblical interpretation are not mutually exclusive, nor do they compete with each other. They are complementary approaches to proper biblical interpretation.

Biblical theology examines “the teaching of individual authors and sections of the Bible and of the place of each teaching in the historical development of the Bible.”¹ In other words, it gives us the historical context of a given passage of Scripture. That is crucial to a systematic theologian, or else the verse may be misapplied. Biblical theology acknowledges the progressive revelation of Scripture in a historical setting. It assesses the impact and influence of language, grammar, culture, and events which may be external to the pages of the Bible itself. But the Bible is what controls our interpretation, not our subjective point of view.

Gerhard Vos, in his inaugural address to the Princeton Seminary in 1894, spoke of the relationship between systematic theology (dogmatics) and biblical theology. Vos is the father of modern biblical theology, so his opinion holds some sway in the matter:

Biblical Theology is of the greatest importance and value for the study of Systematic Theology. It were useless to deny that it has been often cultivated in a spirit more or less hostile to the work in which Systematic Theology is engaged. The very name Biblical Theology is frequently vaunted so as to imply a protest against the alleged un-Biblical character of Dogmatics. I desire to state most emphatically here, that there is nothing in the nature and aims of Biblical Theology to justify such an implication. For anything pretending to supplant Dogmatics there is no place in the circle of Christian Theology.

All attempts to show that the doctrines developed and formulated by the Church have no real foundation in the Bible, stand themselves without the pale of Theology, inasmuch as they imply that Christianity is a purely natural phenomenon, and that the Church has now for nineteen centuries been chasing her own shadow. Dogmatic Theology is, when rightly cultivated, as truly a Biblical and as truly an inductive science as its younger sister. And the latter needs a constructive principle for arranging her facts as well as the former. The only difference is, that in the one case this constructive principle is systematic and logical, whereas in the other case it is purely historical.²

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Intervarsity Press, Leicester, Eng. 2000), p. 1236.

² <http://homepage.mac.com/shanerosenthal/reformationink/gvbiblical.htm>

I suspect Vos would be appalled to know that his caution is largely ignored today. Evangelical theologians have been in pursuit of what is best described as Christian *minimalism*: what is the least amount of doctrine I must subscribe to, and still qualify as a Christian? It is an issue of *diaphora* (things that matter) and *adiaphora* (matters of indifference). Evangelicalism, at its core, is an ecumenical movement. It's whole thrust is to set aside as many distinctives as possible without sacrificing the essentials of the faith. The historic creeds and confessions, which are products of systematic theology, were the single biggest hurdle to establishing an ecumenical creed. If dogmatics have consistently resulted in such statements of doctrine as the Westminster Confession of Faith, then dogmatics is itself an impediment to ecumenicalism. Therefore, throughout evangelical and independent seminaries, biblical theology has supplanted systematic theology. They are now considered antithetical, despite Vos's admonition.

S. M. Baugh writes of this evangelical abuse of biblical theology,

Our evangelical friends are puzzling over hermeneutical theories as well, seen especially in the watchwords, "unity and diversity," and "unity in diversity," and so on. To some people this means searching for the essential "core" of inspired biblical teaching which is surrounded by a potentially tension-filled periphery. Others, though, legitimately see that Matthew differs from Luke or John in theological perspective and concerns without implying contradiction; rather, it provides pleonasm, "fullness" of viewpoint.

The brilliant old Princeton theologian, Geerhardus Vos, anticipated many aspects of today's hermeneutical discussions, notably, issues regarding unity and diversity. The perspective he developed, carried forward by Herman Ridderbos, Richard Gaffin, Edmund Clowney, and others, is called "biblical theology," or the "Redemptive Historical" approach.³

I vehemently disagree with Baugh's conclusion that Vos's torch has somehow been passed on to these theologians. To the contrary, they have been instrumental in undermining Vos's teachings. Their anti-dogmatic views have been inculcated in legions of seminarians who now serve in thousands of congregations and missions around the world. Other less kindred observers than Mr. Baugh, have characterized the views of these men as a pursuit of unity and diversity at any cost, specifically, at the cost of biblical truth – the doctrine of *Justification* being one fatality.

That being said, the need for an Evangelical Creed remains. It is my own heartfelt desire. Every gathering of evangelical theologians in the past 50 years has failed to agree on the core beliefs of the faith – on what it means to be "evangelical" without denominational distinctives. And so, we rely on the Apostle's Creed, which even the Catholics subscribe to. It's as if all the church councils, and all the heresies of the past 1500 years, are somehow irrelevant, and need not be addressed in such a creed. One suspects that those who advocate the views that the church has historically condemned, are the ones who refuse to accept any solution, biblically based or not, that would threaten their private interpretations of Scripture. That's a shame. For all of us.

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³ © 1993, Modern Reformation Magazine (November / December Issue, Vol. 2.2).