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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY AS A BIBLICAL DISCIPLINE

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INTRODUCTION

In *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, a group of biblical theologians and systematic theologians came together to discuss and write on the relationship between Scripture, hermeneutics, and systematic theology. The contributors to the project—perhaps somewhat to their own dismay, but not surprisingly at all—quickly located the disciplinary Moloch that seems to haunt all discussions of the relationship between biblical theology and systematics: what are we to make of systematic theology? The participants could reach no consensus on the question. "Our disagreement on this score," write the editors, "had to do with ongoing controversies among systematicians regarding definitions of their task as theologians and with some of our own caricatures of 'theology' as attempts merely to organize the core, historic doctrines of Christian faith."[1]

While there has been a spate of attempts to offer some definition of the discipline in recent years,[2] these attempts have usually come through the

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[1] Max Turner and Joel B. Green, "New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology: Strangers or Friends?" in Max Turner and Joel B. Green, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 12.

[2] E.g., Robert K. Johnston, ed., *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox, 1985); Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Charles J. Scalise, *From Scripture to Theology: A Canonical Journey into Hermeneutics*

elucidation of theological hermeneutics. Theologians describe what systematic theology does (or should do) and set down some guidelines for the doing of it, but never quite define just what it is that is done. When definitions are proffered, they have tended toward either the banal—such as the organization of doctrines—or the outright dismissive and demeaning. Systematic theology, we are told, is the product of a Greek philosophical mind, and as such is foreign to and subversive of the Christian faith's actual substance and shape. It is argued that the emphasis upon topics rather than story, rationality rather than action, and ideas rather than persons suggests that systematic theology is simply the wrong tool for the job. In the doing of systematic theology, the particularity of the biblical story is absorbed into the abstract, the relational into the cognitive, the historical into timeless truth. In contrast, it is said that the Christian faith invites us to accept the biblical story as our story, to know and live within an encompassing drama that produces Christian identity and calls us to live within a transformed and transforming community for the sake of God's kingdom mission over all things. In short, its critics say that systematics makes no claims upon us and nurtures no relationships, but merely encourages us to bend the Word of God to questions not of its own asking.

I have cited no examples of these criticisms of systematic theology. I have said them all myself. And I am a systematic theologian. My goal in this essay is to present a defense of systematic theology, a discipline that suffers from decidedly poor reviews within present Christian academia and some sectors of the church. Along the way, I will offer my own definition of systematic theology, one that is humbler and more circumspect than some would like, but one that is defensible in light of the sources and calling of the theologian. My thesis is simple, but, I believe, profound and provocative.[3] I will argue that systematic theology, within the evangelical and Reformed tradition,[4] is

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(Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996); David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2003). Aside from these evangelical contributions, see David H. Kelsey, *The Use of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1975) for a liberal treatment of theological hermeneutics, and Gerald O'Collins and Daniel Kendall, *The Bible for Theology: Ten Principles for the Theological Use of Scripture* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) for a Roman Catholic treatment.

[3] Profound in the sense that I wish I had been exposed to it somewhere during my theological studies (I was not), and provocative in the sense that it will produce a measure of discomfort among many of my peers.

[4] By limiting myself to the evangelical and Reformed tradition, I acknowledge the possibility of other ways of envisioning and doing systematic theology. As theological reflection is oriented to the resources

properly bound by the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, and thus should be regulated by the scriptural message and by sound biblical hermeneutics.

Systematics is, first of all, a biblical discipline, and not a speculative one. Far too often, the Bible has functioned merely as a limiting principle within systematic theology, a negative stricture: if Scripture does not disallow an idea, we are free to employ it. Thus, the Bible is more of a constraining authority than a positive guide to theology. My thesis, however, is that Scripture must be allowed to lead our theological reflection rather than merely test it. While those who take the approach toward systematics just described may, and often do, appeal to the authority and even the inerrancy of Scripture, the Bible often fails to function for them as a constructive guide. I want to argue this precise point: the biblical narrative structure, the story of God's relationship with his creation—from Adam to Christ crucified and resurrected to Christ triumphant in the restoration of all things in the kingdom of God—forms the regulative principle and interpretative key for systematic theology no less than it does for biblical theology. This suggests that a systematic theology that is oriented to the biblical narrative and scriptural ways of knowing ought to be redemptive-historically grounded rather than ordered to a cultural convention of rationality or an extra-biblical conception of system.

TRADITIONAL SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

The Movement from Task-Driven Reflection to Systematic Discipline

The discipline of systematic theology did not simply come with the revelation of Scripture. Broadly speaking, theology may be defined as a disciplined reflection upon divine revelation,[5] and systematic theology is a particular approach toward theological reflection. While Christians have always sought to make sense of their faith and understand its implications and

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for thinking about God and his ways that a tradition accepts as legitimate, the discipline of theology will take on quite different contours.

[5] I am here making a distinction between revelation and theology. Revelation is a divine activity; theology is a human activity undertaken in reflective response to revelation. See John Jefferson Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1984), 44; John Feinberg, "Introduction," in David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2003), xv; Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 9.

applications to life—and thus it may be said that there has been a theological enterprise as long as there have been believers—the earliest theology of the church could not really be called systematic theology. Thinkers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian were engaged in theological reflection for the purpose of polemical engagement with teaching that they took as contrary to Scripture (e.g., the Marcionite denigration of creation and rejection of the Old Testament as Scripture), doctrinal exposition of problematic issues (e.g., the relationship between Jesus Christ and God), and the exposition and summation of Scripture for catechetical purposes in the life of the church. In other words, for these early Christian writers, theology was an occasional and task-driven enterprise.[6]

As a disciplined approach toward doctrinal reflection which seeks to create a summary of what the Bible teaches, systematic theology had its beginnings in the medieval church, in the work of such thinkers as Thomas Aquinas and Peter Lombard.[7] The first real textbook of what would become systematic theology, and what would set the model for theological reflection for centuries to come, was Peter Lombard's *Sentences* in the twelfth century. Following John of Damascus' topical division of doctrine, Lombard gathered into his book statements from church fathers and theologians throughout the history of the church and organized them under six topics (*loci*).

In this model, theology became a topical and synthetic discipline, the goal of which was the creation of a system—an integrated, coherent and comprehensive statement of Christian doctrinal teaching. That sounds innocent enough, and there was nothing inherently pernicious about it. But problems did attend the approach. Over the next several centuries, theological study became increasing abstract and distanced from the text of Scripture. One primary principle would inform both the move toward abstraction and the relativization of Scripture: the goal of theology came to be understood as a declaration of timeless truth—eternally true doctrinal statements. This goal itself seems to have been influenced by the Greek suspicion of history (think Pythagorus, not Heraclitus). Theology was not oriented toward historical knowing, but

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[6] See Yves M. J. Congar, *A History of Theology* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 37ff.

[7] Origen's *De Principiis* and Augustine's *Enchiridion* may stand as pre-medieval forays into systematics, as both men sought to produce a sort of compendium of Christian doctrine.

ahistorical knowing, toward definitions rather than relationships, toward things rather than persons or processes.[8]

The Impulse Toward Abstraction

I have just mentioned the suspicion of history that came from Greek philosophy and informed so much of the Western mind. As that is a very vague broadside sort of statement, let me offer a particular example. From Aristotelian metaphysics, medieval theology inherited the distinction between essences and accidents. According to this way of thinking, an essential attribute is necessary to a thing such that the loss or diminution of that attribute would constitute a loss of being. When applied to God, a divine attribute is a property that God could not lose and continue to be God. Indeed, knowing these attributes constitutes a kind of knowledge of God, for they define what God is; they define his essence. But things also possess nonessential properties. Aristotle called them "accidents." A table, for example, could be painted, varnished, or left unfinished. One could cut its legs shorter, move it to another room, use it as a surface upon which to serve the evening meal or perform open heart surgery, but in all these cases, the thing would still be a table. Its essence would not be changed. The only changes effected by carrying out any of these proposed actions would be to the nonessential characteristics of the table (the accidents).

Many of the predicates ascribed to God in Scripture denote not attributes or essential properties but nonessential properties—accidents. These nonessential properties, according to Thomas Aquinas, do not define what God is but relate God to his creatures. Relational predicates such as personhood, emotional states, character traits, and actions do not denote essential divine attributes. They are relations that are extraneous (accidental) to the divine being. To say that God is the Creator, or that God is the covenant Lord of Israel, is to make nonessential statements. It is rationally possible that God may never have chosen to create in the first place or to enter into a covenant relationship with Abraham. And if he had not done those things he would still be what he is. Historical actions and relationships are of negligible import philosophically

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[8] G. R. Evans, *Old Arts and New Theology: The Beginnings of Theology as an Academic Discipline* (New York: Oxford, 1980), 137ff.

since they are voluntary, nonessential, accidental. They are, then, irrelevant to knowing God's essence (the accumulation of his attributes).[9]

With this construction, high medieval theology (what may be called *scholasticism*) would move toward a distinction between nature and works. Nature (essences) became the subject of natural theology and was thought of as prior to and determinative for the study of works and relationships, which are known through biblical revelation. God, and what is most important to know about God, can be known apart from his actions and relationships in history. Theology came to be a defining of the divine, an abstractive and metaphysical knowledge of God apart from the plane of history.[10]

The Metaphysical Orientation

We might think of the scholastic relativization of history as an attempt to position human knowing on the transcendent side of the Creator-creation boundary. To use Karl Barth's memorable phrase, the scholastics sought "to lighten heaven with earth's searchlights," rather than "let the light of heaven be seen and understood on earth."[11] Curiously, the ahistorical impulse of scholastic theology even extended to the divine acts within history. According to the datum that whatever God does in history he has already determined in eternity, scholastic theology thought of creation, sin, redemption, and glorification as categories in the mind of God rather than as historical events. Once these things have been abstracted from the temporal sequence of Scripture and turned into divine ideas or free-floating theological constructs, they are free to be ordered according to the preferences of the theological system. And, of course, this would give birth in seventeenth-century Reformed thought to complex systems of decrees in which the theologian speculates upon a pre-creational moment in the mind of God rather than attending to the biblical and temporal order. What we have, then, is theology as a virtual

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[9] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part 1, for a discussion of the divine attributes.

[10] Addressing the medieval habit to engage in "ontologizing thought," and thus the development of theology as a "metaphysical science of speculation," Harvie M. Conn notes that "the danger of this abstractionist thinking has always been that things are viewed as existing in themselves without taking into consideration the relationships in which they stand to other things." (Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Trialogue* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1984], 217–18).

[11] Quoted in G. C. Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), 38.

dissection of the divine mind and an assumed familiarity with that mind. Notice that in this move away from history and toward metaphysics, actual, living, breathing human beings and actual history become irrelevant to the theological agenda. And that was intentional within the scholastic theological scheme. Persons, relationships, and events are messy things, hard to fit into the unilateral views of agency favored by the canons of logic and rationality that emerged with the western academy. Unfortunately, the kind of unilinear, rational neatness prized by the scholastic theologians is not much in evidence in the Bible.

Scripture Under the Assumption of an Extra-Biblical System

Under the theological method I have just described, the Bible came to be understood not as a story but as a data dump, a collection of timelessly true propositions that were somewhat haphazardly thrown together. As one modern evangelical theologian who follows this traditional method of theology put it: the Bible is a huge jigsaw puzzle that the theologian must put together.[12] The analogy of mining a hillside for precious jewels has also been employed. Criticizing rather than affirming the proof-text approach toward theology, Kevin Vanhoozer writes that "for large swaths of the Western tradition, the task of theology consisted in mining propositional nuggets from the biblical deposit of truth."[13]

What is the Bible in such a system? It is a depository for proof-texts. A proof-text is a biblical statement or citation that does not require a context in order to be coherent and meaningful. Its function has nothing to do with the over-arching biblical story in which it is embedded or the specific genre in which it is found. Also, the function of a proof-text is assigned by an extra-biblical structure: the system of doctrine. The Bible exists primarily to support the system, in the same way that bricks provide building material for a building. As the bricks are but raw material for the builder, with the building itself being his goal, so here the goal is the system of doctrine, not the knowing

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[12] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 29.

[13] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no.1 (March 2005): 94.

of Scripture. God is known not through Scripture so much as through the system.

What of events? At best, biblical events and relationships became instantiations of eternal truths. And according to this way of thinking, that is the real purpose of Scripture: to provide declarations and examples of eternal truths. The historical drama that stands behind the text is but the delivery mechanism for the collection of eternal verities. Vanhoozer suggests that the traditional systematic tendency of focusing on the propositional content of proof-texts "leads one to *dedramatize* the Scriptures, and in so doing misrepresenting the Bible."[14] Trevor Hart has added the helpful insight that the traditional habit of thinking of the Bible merely as a collection of doctrinal propositions undermines the integrity of the Bible as canon and its unity as revelation, or at least redefines canon and biblical unity in unfortunate ways. As bits of text are "torn away from their textual, let alone their canonical, contexts and reassembled within some framework of interpretation," we implicitly declare that the canon of Scripture is merely "'these particular texts and no others' rather than 'these texts as a whole'," because the whole, the unifying principle, or what Hart calls "the essential logic behind proof-texting" lies within the theologian's system rather than within Scripture.[15]

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Beginnings: The Reaction Against Scholasticism

The beginnings of biblical theology are hard to trace, if by *beginnings* we mean the identification of that one person or point in time as the genesis. We might better speak of contributors to the phenomenon. Luther's principle of *sola scriptura*—the Bible as the *norming norm* for all theological reflection—and

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[14] Ibid., 102. Vanhoozer has also employed the metaphor of fishing to describe the proof-text approach toward systematics: "Much systematic theology that passes as 'biblical' enjoys only a casual acquaintance with the biblical texts. The method of proving doctrines by adducing multiple proof-texts leaves much to be desired. One typically begins with a doctrinal confession and then sets off trawling through the Scriptures. One's exegetical 'catch' is then dumped indiscriminately into parentheses irrespective of where the parts are found" (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "From Canon to Concept: 'Same' and 'Other' in the Relation Between Biblical and Systematic Theology," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12, no. 2 [1994]: 104).

[15] Trevor Hart, "Tradition, Authority, and a Christian Approach to the Bible as Scripture," in *Between Two Horizons*, 200.

Calvin's use of the humanist dictum *ad fontes* ("back to sources") must both be counted as early igniters of the movement toward biblical theology. Johannes Cocceius (1603–69) anticipated later developments in biblical theology through his emphasis on the biblical covenants and God's dealing with his people in the history of salvation. The first uses of the term *biblical theology* appear to have come from the Pietist tradition of Spener and Franke (ca. 1700). And the rise throughout the Enlightenment period—with its emphasis upon historical interpretation—of what might be called the *historical consciousness* and new tools for critical and historical research also played an important role in the maturation of biblical theology.[16]

What all of the persons and movements mentioned here had in common was that they were all reacting against the scholastic tradition in theology. All noticed the disconnect between the Bible and the theological habits of scholasticism: *this* does not look like *that.* The Bible does not read like a scholastic textbook; to find the conclusions of a lot of scholastic theology in Scripture, one must begin by presupposing them in the first place. And if that is the case, the question arises: are we reading those conclusions out of Scripture, or reading them into it?

Some recent definitions of biblical theology have concentrated merely upon the idea of order. Thus, Scott Hafemann writes that "biblical theology attempts to ascertain the inner points of coherence and development within the biblical narrative and exposition. It does its work inductively from within the Bible in an attempt to bring out the Bible's own message."[17] Likewise, Trevor Hart suggests that biblical theology seeks to unfold unifying patterns within the biblical canon, "thereby to offer some more organized interpretation of the faith which vibrates through what is intrinsically an 'unsystematic' body of literature, and so to offer an account of Scripture's own theological priorities and emphases."[18] Yet, as Hart notes, if this is all biblical theology is or does, what truly distinguishes it from systematic theology? If biblical theology's

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[16] For a useful survey of the emergence and history of biblical theology as an academic discipline, see Craig Bartholomew, "Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation: Introduction," in Craig Bartholomew, et al., *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 1–10. For a more detailed exposition, see Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 9–28.

[17] Scott J. Hafemann, ed., *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 16.

[18] Trevor Hart, "Systematic—In What Sense?" in *Out of Egypt*, 345.

concern is to trace patterns and find connections within the biblical text, is it not "already involved in a 'systematic' enterprise, and . . . therefore a form of systematic theology"?[19]

Well, not in the sense of traditional systematic theology. The question is: what is being ordered and what is being traced? Biblical theology begins with the insight that the Bible is a referential revelation.[20] I. Howard Marshall makes the point most elegantly when he proclaims that "evangelicals would want to insist that if the text does not witness to a genuine saving and judging intervention of God in human history, 'we are of all men most miserable.'"[21] In other words, the Bible is about—refers to—God's mighty deeds in history. The biblical revelation is about something other than the mere words of the text.

"Christianity is not in the last resort about relations between texts, but about events in the real world: the Word of God did not for us become incarnate in a book, but in a life."[22] This means, as Hart is quick to point out, that "the real point of Scripture, what it is 'about,' is God's dealings with humankind in history, and its meaning is bound up, therefore, with *the meaning of events* in which this history unfolds, events in the life of Israel and the life of Jesus through which God in some sense reveals himself and his purposes for us."[23] This is not to denigrate or marginalize Scripture in any way, for "our access to the referent of the text is *through the text*."[24] Within the Reformed and evangelical understanding, the Bible belongs to the organism of God's special or particular revelation, but the biblical text does not exhaust that revelation. Richard Gaffin has depicted the relationship between Scripture and historical referent this way:

> Scripture is a record of revelation. It witnesses to the special revelation of God which consists in his ongoing covenant faithfulness in word and deed and which has its consummation in the person and work of Christ. In an important respect inscripturation as a mode of revelation is not an end in itself but the

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[19] Ibid.

[20] The debate surrounding historical reference and the Bible is far more complex than we can entertain here. See Scalise, *From Scripture to Theology*, 27–41, and the contributions in Hafemann, *Biblical Theology*. For a recent defense of historical referentiality, see Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, "Story in Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt*, 144–171.

[21] I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2004), 22.

[22] John Barton, *People of the Book?* (London: SPCK, 1988), 34, quoted in Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking*, 114.

[23] Hart, *Faith Thinking*, 114.

[24] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 105.

(necessary and sufficient) means to an end. And the proper focus of interpretation is the subject matter of the text, that is, the history with Christ at its center that lies in back of the text.[25]

Looking for the Story:
Affirmation of the Bible as an Historical Document

Biblical theology seeks to read the Bible as an historical document. In this it is almost the opposite of scholastic theology. The biblical theologian is looking for the story, what Geerhardus Vos called "the history of redemption." Why look for the story? Vos' answer is: that's what the Bible is. "God has embodied the contents of revelation, not in a dogmatic system, but in a book of history…The Bible is not a dogmatic textbook but a historical book full of dramatic interest."[26] The Bible's subject matter is not abstract ideas or context-free truth-claims; rather, Scripture is oriented toward and is meant to be a disclosure of God's action in history. Richard Gaffin, using words that sound amazingly like those of Calvin, describes Vos' understanding of the nature of Scripture: "Revelation is not so much divinely given *gnosis* to provide us with knowledge concerning the nature of God, man, and the world as it is divinely inspired interpretation of God's activity of redeeming men so that they might worship and serve him in the world."[27] Gaffin summarizes the Vosian notion this way: "The deepest motive controlling the flow of the history of revelation is not instruction but incarnation." He then quotes Vos himself: "The circle of revelation is not a school, but a 'covenant.'"[28]

What is Vos doing? If he is right that salvation depends on what God has done in history, especially in the work of Christ, then the fact that biblical revelation comes to us as an organically unfolding historical drama bears theological import. That fact should set the theological agenda. It should

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[25] Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1976): 293–94.

[26] Quoted in Richard Gaffin, "Introduction," in Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2001 [1980]), xv. The focus of the written biblical word is the redemptive history, which is declared and interpreted by the written word. Vos wrote: "Revelation is so interwoven with redemption [God's redemptive action in history] that, unless allowed to consider the latter, it would be suspended in the air" (Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948], 24).

[27] Gaffin, "Introduction," xvii.

[28] Ibid.

structure the theological mind. Vos wants to allow the structure of biblical religion to set the structure of theological reflection.

THE RELATION BETWEEN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Systematics and Rationalism

We should note that, even if we subtract the more speculative aspects of traditional systematic theology—that which we typified as the scholastic interest in the metaphysical at the expense of the creational and the temporal—the discipline is still oriented to the rational more than to the relational, and to the pursuit of a timeless statement of the *facts* more than to the historical unfolding of God's Word. In the words of D. A. Carson, the traditional and still prevailing model of systematic theology is oriented to the rational and hierarchical rather than to the temporal, and thus does not "encourage the exploration of the Bible's plot-line, except incidentally."[29]

Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* makes Carson's point. Grudem sees systematic theology as a topically-driven, synthetic presentation of Christian doctrine in which all the facts of revelation "fit together in a consistent way" within the revelational jigsaw puzzle. The goal of rational consistency is an organized, internally coherent, non-contradictory system of truth.[30] Grudem's own system is seen in his stated methodology:

1. Select all the "verses" that speak to a topic.
2. Summarize the teaching of each verse.
3. Synthesize them into a coherent doctrinal statement.[31]

Under this scheme, the doctrine of God is a rational explication of the facts about God, the doctrine of Christ is a rational presentation of the facts about Christ, and so on. Theology is a systematization of revelatory facts, collected into a rationally organized encyclopedia. We should note the *disembodiment of*

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[29] D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 102.

[30] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 21–24.

[31] Ibid., 36.

proposition in this approach toward theology. It assumes that the truth statements of Scripture are so sufficiently self-contained that they are separable not only from the literary genres and contexts (both literary and historical) that bear them (making the exegete cry "foul"), but also from the historical relationships and acts which are their intended biblical referents (driving the biblical theologian crazy). What is the assumed hermeneutic here? The assumption that the Bible is a loose collection of disembodied propositions produces its own way of reading God's Word.[32]

Focusing upon Scripture as doctrinal propositions, traditional systematics tends to flatten out the biblical text. The complexity and ambiguity of reality is lost in the press toward univocal neatness and rational fit, and the dynamic of events and relationships is reduced to broad generalities. Noting the bloodless and impoverished world depicted in many systematics texts, Rainer Albertz commented that "they often have an effect that is remarkably static, lifeless, and at times boring."[33] Applying and developing J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, Kevin Vanhoozer has located the failure of systematics to capture the vitality and depth of Scripture not simply in its sacrifice of the historical but also in the way systematics has tended to treat all biblical expression as if it were ontological and conceptual. In handling all biblical statements as if they were the same sort of statement—didactic declaration—systematics treats the Bible as if it were nothing more than a collection of lecture notes.[34]

Vos' Criticism of Systematics

Working more than half a century ago, Geerhardus Vos was critical of traditional systematic theology. But to what was Vos opposed? Did he reject the very idea of systematic theology, in which case biblical theology is presented as an alternative theological approach? Many people see the relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology as antithetical. If biblical theology is

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[32] For a provocative reflection on the point that our assumptions about the nature of Scripture and how the believer accesses revelation affect what we actually find in the reading of the Bible, see Calvin G. Seerveld, *How to Read the Bible to Hear God Speak: A Study of Numbers 22–24* (Sioux Center, Ia.: Dordt, 2003).

[33] Quoted in John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology,* vol. 1*: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVasity Press, 2003), 38.

[34] For a helpful summary of speech-act theory, see Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms," in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1986), 85–92.

good, then systematics must be bad. And, of course, within this dichotomous construct, if systematic theology is good, then biblical theology must be bad.[35] Characterizing systematic theology as the elevation of ideas over history, the abstract over the relational, the biblical theologian John Goldingay writes that "if systematic theology did not exist, it might seem unwise to invent it."[36]

Vos was not so eager to dismiss systematics. Take note of the way in which Gaffin couches Vos' criticism. Gaffin notes that because Vos understood the Bible as itself possessing a unified structure—the history of redemption—Vos was opposed to "the ever-present tendency to view the Bible as a mass of ambiguously related particulars for which some extra-biblical prolegomena or systematics supplies the necessary structuring principle."[37] Gaffin continues: "There is little question that Vos is countering what he considers a tendency in Protestant orthodoxy to deal with Scripture largely in terms of the *loci* or topical structure of dogmatics and in so doing to treat its statements as more or less isolated proof-texts."[38]

Summarizing the Vosian biblical theological criticism of systematics, Gaffin writes:

> The notion has to be avoided that the historical character of the Bible must somehow be overcome before we have the truth for today. It is no more the case that the Bible is true in spite of or apart from its historical qualification than it is the case that the death of Christ is efficacious in spite of its historicity. In fact, to remove the negatives and disjunctives from the preceding sentence will disclose the integral tie between truth and history from a biblical point of view: the Bible is true in view of its historical qualification, just as the death of Christ is efficacious in view of its historicity.[39]

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[35] Richard Gaffin has recently noted the phenomenon that some "question the value of biblical theology, if they have already concluded that it has introduced novelties detrimental to the well-being of the church," or that they believe that biblical theology undermines "doctrinal stability by diminishing interest and confidence in the formulations of classical Reformed theology." Yet Gaffin is quick to point out that biblical theology is no modernist innovation. Centering our faith and our theological reflection upon the history of redemption can be traced to the second century and the church's battle against the Gnostic heresy. Irenaeus of Lyons championed the insight that "salvation resides ultimately not in who God is or what he has said, but in what he has done in history, once for all, in Christ." (Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 [2003]: 165.)

[36] John Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," in *Between Two Horizons*, 138.

[37] Gaffin, "Introduction," xviii.

[38] Ibid., xix–xx.

[39] Ibid., xx–xxi.

Neither Vos nor Gaffin are suggesting that systematics is automatically wrong-headed. But they are asking us to rethink what we mean by systematic theology and how we go about practicing it.

The Call to Reform Systematic Theology

Let us begin by affirming that there is nothing wrong with asking topical questions of the biblical text. We all do it. And, after all, synthesis is unavoidable. All human beings seek coherence of thought. We add this to that, and, if need be, order the two in some way. Thus, if we do theology, the impulse toward systematic coherence will be present.

I am making the assumption that such a practice is not inherently foolhardy or contrary to the spirit of Scripture. Yet, two immediate objections arise to the impulse to systematize. First, it might be pointed out that all attempts to ask questions of the Bible as a single book assume that it speaks with one voice and presents a unified, lucid perspective on reality. To object to this assumes that the biblical materials are just too diverse to bear the weight of the synthetic enterprise. Rather than get a single answer to a question—say, "what is the nature of sin?"—a survey of Scripture will produce a multitude of answers. One answer (or perhaps three) will come from Isaiah, another from the Psalms, another from John, another from Paul. And there is no reason to expect (insist?) that these different answers will gibe with one another. Indeed, one may end up with a series of answers that defy synthesis, even answers that contradict one another (or, in some cases, with no answers at all).

Although this objection might strike the evangelical as the product of liberal assumptions about the nature of Scripture, we should at least appreciate that it wants to do justice to the diversity within the Bible. Evangelicals confess that the Bible is the Word of God, by which we mean that ultimately God is the author—and the authority—who stands behind the text. While there is one speaker—God in the written revelation of his ways to his people—Scripture is mediated to us by means of many voices, voices that have their own specific historical and cultural circumstances, needs, and interests. The multiplicity of voices within the canon of Scripture presents the theologian with challenges, but they are actually allies rather than impediments.

Second, even if we confess Scripture as a faithful and reliable revelation of God, and even if we affirm a principle of analogy that will allow the synthesis

that the topical agenda requires, it might still be asked whether the systematic impulse arises from and complements the biblical message, or in fact obscures or even loses that message in the forest of systematic *loci*. Reminiscent of the biblical theology movement of the post-World War II era, John Goldingay goes so far as to allege that systematic theology emerged from within a Greek philosophical framework in which ideas replace stories as the bearers of truth and meaning. And thus, systematic theology, he says, is an alien branch grafted onto the vine of Christian faith. From this perspective, the systematic project is foreign in heritage and contrary in method—the wrong tool for the job of faithful reflection upon biblical faith.[40] Although I do not wish to gloss over the issues raised in Goldingay's fine essay, I find his assertions relative to the heritage and essential nature of systematics too broad and somewhat ill-defined. Regardless, we will seek to keep a number of his challenges to systematics in mind as we proceed.

What is Systematic Theology?

Defining systematic theology is both as easy as pie and as vexing as trying to understand one's spouse. First, the easy part. Systematic theology is oriented to this question: What does the entirety of God's revelation tell us about X? And that question itself tells us two things. First, systematic theology is a topically-driven discipline.[41] Second, systematic theology is synthetic in nature; it is an integrative, interdisciplinary activity. Systematic theology is dependent upon the exegesis of Scripture; dependent upon the entirety of Scripture; and dependent upon the insights of biblical theology, two millennia of the church's theological reflection, the church's confessional heritage, and whatever else

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[40] "Perhaps it is indeed the case that humanity's rationality necessitates analytic reflection on the nature of the faith; at least, the importance of rationality for intellectuals necessitates our analytic reflection on the nature of the faith as one of the less important aspects of the life of Christ's body. Yet such rational and disciplined reflection need not take the form of systematic theology . . . . We need to distinguish between the possible necessity that the church reflects deeply, sharply, coherently, and critically on its faith, and the culture-relative fact that this has generally been done in a world of thought decisively influenced by Greek thinking in general as well as in particular (e.g., Platonic or Aristotelian)" (John Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," 129).

[41] I agree with Richard Gaffin that the topical nature of systematics does not make it an inherently abstract and rationalistic endeavor. While the so-called *loci* method may be easily bent to a dehistorical and decontextual understanding the faith, there is no reason that it must do so. See Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "The Vitality of Reformed Dogmatics," in J. M. Batteau, et al., *The Vitality of Reformed Theology* (Kampen: Kok, 1994), 28–9.

from human experience and academic study that can help us to answer the question.

Now for the hard part: What does the word *system* mean? We might begin by hazarding the notion that *system* refers to that which holds together all the different parts and dependencies just noted. But what might this system be? The truth is, *system* is a vague term, so vague in fact that people often throw up their hands and fall silent here. In an essay devoted to the nature of systematic theology, John Murray offers a number of warnings about the discipline—such as "there is an ever-present tendency toward abstraction in systematic theology,"[42]—but beyond that he spends most of the essay talking about biblical theology. John Frame also struggles with the word *system*. He explicitly asks, "What does the word 'systematic' mean in the phrase 'systematic theology'?" Does it mean logical consistency and orderliness? Yes, but should not all theological disciplines be consistent and orderly, and be sensitive to the rules of valid inference and inductive generalization? Does it mean coherence? Yes, but does that mean that other approaches to theology are then to be seen as incoherent? It seems that most of the adjectives used to distinguish systematic theology from other approaches to theology fail to distinguish it at all, for they name general, even expected, reflective virtues. And just where *is* this system, whatever it is? If the system is something other than Scripture itself, then we have set up some extra-biblical grid through which we access God's Word, and that is dangerous. We have created a new *norming norm*, the very thing from which the Reformers were seeking to escape. When we talk about a *system of doctrine,* we had better be talking about Scripture itself, or we have violated the principle of *sola scriptura*.[43]

Some years ago, Richard Gaffin wrote an article for the *Westminster Theological Journal* on the relationship between biblical theology and systematics. Spending the lion's share of his efforts on defining and defending biblical theology, Gaffin really had little to say about systematic theology. In this, he was simply following Vos and Murray before him. Comparing biblical theology and systematics, Gaffin wrote:

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[42] John Murray, "Systematic Theology," in *Collected Writings of John Murray,* vol. 4*: Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh, Scotland/Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1982), 17.

[43] John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1987), 212–14.

> The approach of biblical theology is historical, while that of systematic theology is logical. The former deals with revelation as an activity or process, the latter deals with it as a finished product. Vos uses the difference between drawing a line (biblical theology) and a circle (systematics) to illustrate how they differ.[44]

Footnoting his comment, Gaffin elaborates on systematic theology by saying that the use of the terms "logical" and "systematic" as descriptors are, of course, "conventional."[45] This is not much help, although I am convinced that Gaffin is right. Frame too gives up on trying to define systematic theology. After speaking of the scope or calling of the discipline (what does the whole Bible teach us about X?), Frame says simply, "I cannot make any positive sense of the term 'system' in the phrase 'systematic theology'."[46] But one phrase in Frame is helpful. While admitting defeat in trying to define "systematic," he does go on to speak of a "systematic perspective."

I would like to suggest that the idea of a *system* comes from the ancient Christian notion of *the analogy of faith*. As the Word of God, the Bible constitutes a harmonious whole. This means that all the parts—that is, those beliefs generated by the reading of Scripture and our familiarity with the historical discussion of the church—will cohere with one another. The systematic impulse perceives that coherence from the standpoint of the whole (Frame's "systematic perspective" or Vos' circle). Systematic theology is thus a holistic discipline. By itself, that suggests that the key to systematic theology is its accumulative and integrative character. It seeks to synthesize all the elements from the standpoint of the whole.

But a bit more needs to be said. D. A. Carson argues that systematic theology is characterized by cultural engagement, a bridging of the original horizon of the text with the present cultural horizon of the people of God. While exegesis and biblical theology cannot escape cultural influence, their focus is the biblical text. One can legitimately argue, as has Harvie Conn, that all theology is "historically contextual" in that the theologian functions within a

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[44] Richard Gaffin, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 290.

[45] Gaffin cannot seem to make up his mind whether the terms "logical" and "systematic" have any real meaning at all. In one footnote he says that "while the appropriateness of these adjectives for distinguishing the discipline in view is subject to question, surely the intention is to identify its *topical* or loci structure" ("Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 290n24). A bit later he writes that "'systematic' or 'logical' hardly serve to identify the topical approach that distinguishes it" (ibid., 295n29).

[46] Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 214.

particular cultural moment, a moment that invariably informs and shapes his or her reflection.[47] Systematic theology, however, takes cultural engagement as part of its explicit focus. The systematic theologian asks his questions from the historical-cultural standpoint of the church, and seeks to speak to the church. But Carson takes this a step further. Not only does systematic theology emanate from within a cultural moment as the church asks: What does it all add up to?, but the culturally embedded systematic impulse also shapes the questions that are asked. As an integrative, holistic, culturally-engaged enterprise, systematic theology is also the most worldview-forming of all the theological disciplines.[48] It seeks to shape the theological reflection and the cultural engagement of the church from the vantage point of the big picture (Carson), or the systematic perspective (Frame). Pursuing a "large-scale, worldview-forming synthesis," systematic theology stands one step further away from Scripture than does biblical theology, and one step closer to culture.[49] While I do not much like the characterization of systematic theology as relatively distant from Scripture, I appreciate Carson's point that systematics not only arises from within a particular historical-cultural location—as does all theological reflection—but is also conscious of the fact that it speaks to a particular historical moment.

Reforming the Method: How Do We Do It?

Biblical Truth is Neither Ahistorical Nor Acultural. Contrary to Carson and Conn, evangelicals have traditionally tended to think of theology in acultural and decontextual terms, that is, as the pursuit of timeless and universal truth. Accordingly, systematic theology seeks to emancipate theological reflection from any historical-cultural context. But this is exactly the problem: it represents a right insight gone wrong. The right insight is that God's character and ways are universally true and universally relevant to human life. Where it goes wrong is that traditional systematics seeks to find the universality of theological assertions through an ahistorical, rationalist method. As the rational construct comes to dominate theological discourse, the biblical story fades into comparative irrelevance. What is missed here is that the Bible refuses to function this way. The truth about God, about sin, about angels, about Christ,

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[47] Harvie Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds*, 241–42.

[48] D. A. Carson, "Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology," 102.

[49] Ibid., 103.

about the Holy Spirit, is transcultural, but it is never acultural. It is transhistorical rather than ahistorical. The biblical message—doctrine—arises within historical-cultural context in the sense that it is revealed within, is always applicable to, and is inseparable from human cultural and historical existence. Curiously, the very historicity of the story is crucial to the biblical message, to doctrine. As the biblical materials begin with creation and refuse to end before the promise of recreation is fulfilled, all history—and thus all people within their particular historical contexts—are addressed by the biblical message.

William Edgar suggests that the movement toward abstraction in which the biblical materials are transformed into ahistorical, universal themes, is both unnecessary and, ultimately, less than helpful:

> The second person of the Trinity became not humanity in general, but a man, a unique person from a unique place. Jesus Christ and his teachings, as William Temple once put it, were a "scandal of particularity." In S. Mark Heim's felicitous expression, "If God were to be as human as we are, Jesus must have a fingerprint as unique as each one of ours." Only from this extraordinary particularity can Jesus then be universal. He did not look down from heaven and proclaim timeless truths with no application to culture. Rather, he became a real human being, a particular Semitic male, at a particular time of history, because such concreteness is the only way to be human. Because Jesus is a particular man, his message is then truly applicable to all of humanity, to women and to men from every tribe and group.
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> And so, the message has a shape. It has contours. It is particular in order to be universal. Just as God brought about the redemption of every kind of person through the one man, the God-man Jesus Christ, so his revelation, though encapsulated in words from the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages, is universal, valid across all boundaries of time and space and culture.[50]

One of the reasons that systematic theology is forced to fight the battle of relevance is because of its own abstraction away from the historical-cultural concreteness of the biblical drama. By choosing a philosophical frame of reference for talking about God—a language which speaks in universal, abstract, and often impersonal categories—classical systematics spoke about God in ways that were less than biblically relevant to the realities of our historical life in the world.

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[50] Willam Edgar, *Truth in All Its Glory: Commending the Reformed Faith* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2004), 2–3.

An example or two might help us to make the point. It has long been the tradition within dogmatics to speak of God's power under the term *omnipotence*. I have to admit that there is something about the classical "*omnis*" (i.e., the entire method of thinking about the divine attributes by classical theism) that leaves me cold. They may be correct in a technical sense, in the sense that a schematic or a diagram or a flowchart is correct, but they are also somewhat lifeless. Does God possess all power? Yes, of course. As Yahweh himself says to Abraham when Sarah laughed at God's promise of a child for them, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14).[51] He is the maker of worlds. Isaiah 40 speaks of God measuring out the waters in the palm of his hand and marking off the heavens by his mere fingertip. Truly, his power is incomparable and inconceivably great.

My problem with the notion of omnipotence—and I admit that it may be at least partly linguistic—is that the language of the classical *omnis* is too diffuse, too general, too abstract. When Scripture speaks of God's power, it is always directed power, personal power, righteous power. It is not power in the abstract, but *his* power. The classical approach, however, was concerned to articulate God's power, knowledge, and presence in universal, undifferentiated, and extensive terms. Thus God is *omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent*. But God's particularity, his person, suffered in the equation. Yes, God's lordship is universal, but it is as a particular God that he is also the universal Lord. Furthermore, and terminally adding to the abstraction, classical theism has often developed the divine attributes such that they become mere ideas, separated from any hint of particularity; omnipotence, for example, is not *God's power* so much as it is the raw *idea of unlimited power*. Thus the discussion becomes a philosophical analysis of omnipotence *per se*.

The Apostles' Creed might help us here. The first article of our English translation describes God as *the Father Almighty*. The word *almighty* is a translation of the Greek παντοκράτωρ (all-governing one). Latin versions of the Creed employed the word *omnipotens*. The Latin *omnipotens* speaks of unqualified, universal, impersonal, extensive power. Παντοκράτωρ, however, is directed, purposeful, particular, personal power. After all, a ruler presupposes a subject or a realm that is ruled, and thus relationship, a context in which

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[51] Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations in this essay are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

power is exercised. Further, a particular kind of rule is implicit within the Creed, namely, a morally righteous rule.

From a biblical perspective, παντοκρατωρ (all-governing) is closer to the biblical reality than is *omnipotens* (omnipotent). The term *omnipotence* represents power within itself, without reference to anything else. And this was a real problem in medieval theology. For many theologians in the middle ages, God was *potentia absoluta* (absolute possibility). By definition, God can do anything. Thus, he might do anything (this was the conclusion of medieval nominalism). This caused real anxiety of soul for Martin Luther as a young monk. Perhaps, thought Luther, God will change his mind about me, for as absolute power, God is arbitrary power. Biblically, however, we must say that God's power is bound to his covenant word. There are, after all, things God *cannot* do. He cannot, for example, fail to keep his promises. Simply put, God's covenant promises limit the range of things he can do. God binds himself to his promises.

What of omniscience and omnipresence? Psalm 147:5 says that there is no limit to God's understanding. We would, then, be right to conclude that God knows everything there is to know. And I want to affirm that. Yet the biblical focus usually lies upon an intensive knowing on God's part. The existential relevance of God's knowledge is that God knows each one of us ~~me~~ inside and out. We see this quite clearly in Psalm 139, a classic text relative to God's knowledge and presence. In that text, divine knowing and presence are functions of God's covenantal lordship. Nothing is hidden from his gaze. There are no secrets in his universe:

> O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. (vv.1–5)

In verse 7 and following, David focuses his attention on the presence of God:

> Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! (vv.7–8)

This is no diffuse presence that exists everywhere like oxygen. Rather, it is personal, intensive, and purposeful presence. There is nowhere for the sinner to hide. There is nowhere where God cannot help his covenant people. God may be present everywhere, but he is intensively so, covenantally so. In Jeremiah 23:23–24, Yahweh himself warns us against limiting his presence to the parochial as well as making his presence so vague and universal that it is of no practical good.

> Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God afar off? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD.

In a sense, the classical emphasis upon divine attributes as the key to knowing God is a bit misplaced. More often than not, Scripture reveals God by way of his actions and relationships rather than by a discussion of the divine nature. God's identity and character, rather than his nature, seem to be the fundamental biblical concern. As depiction is more central than definition, the operative question for theological reflection is not so much *what* is God? as it is *who* is God?[52] Creating, judging sin, calling a people to himself through acts of redemption, making promises, walking with his people: these are the ways that God is known in the biblical story. The *little credo* of Deuteronomy 26:5–9 identifies and confesses God through a recitation of his mighty deeds on behalf of Israel: his calling of Abraham to walk in his ways, his rescuing of the seed of Abraham from the Egyptian brick pits, and his bringing of them into the land he had promised to the patriarchs. In effect, the *credo* answers the question, *who* is God? Its answer is that he is the One who calls, redeems, and walks with us. This story was, if you will, Israel's gospel, the story she was called to live within and declare to the nations. Further, as Goldingay notes, "New Testament faith sees itself as the continuing of that story. Like the Old Testament, the New Testament takes predominantly narrative form, and the form corresponds to the nature of the faith. Its gospel is not essentially or distinctively a statement that takes the form of 'God is love,' but one that takes the form 'God so loved that he gave . . . .'"[53]

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[52] See Vanhoozer, "From Canon to Concept," 108.

[53] Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," 130. Goldingay's comment betrays a false dichotomy, one that can be allowed to stand only as a relative statement identifying a general trajectory, and not an absolute. After all, Scripture does tell us that "God is love" (1 John 4:16).

Elsewhere Goldingay has written:

> Christian theology has not regularly talked about God in narrative terms. The creeds, for instance, are structured around the persons of the Father, Son and Spirit, and systematic theology has often taken God's trinitarian nature as its structural principle. Before the revival of trinitarian thinking in the late twentieth century, systematic theology often emphasized the fundamental significance of attributes of God such as omnipotence, omniscience and perfection. The Old Testament narrative does incorporate equivalent statements about God's character, such as God's self-description in Exodus 34:6–7. But the kinds of statements about God that emerge more directly from the narrative itself are not those one typically sees in a systematic theological treatment of divine attributes. It is narrative that nuances who the Father is, for example, or what omnipotence is, or what grace is.[54]

That Scripture primarily reveals God's identity and character by his active involvement in the life and history of his people does not mean that it cannot also speak in more discursive, even metaphysical, ways in its depiction of God. Next to the *little credo* stood the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4–5 as a fundamental Old Testament confession of faith: "Hear, O Israel, The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Certainly this text is making an ontological assertion about God. Yet this statement is itself grounded in the story of Israel's deliverance, in which narrative declarations such as Deuteronomy 5:6–7 ("I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me") give not only the context of the ontological assertion, but also, it seems to me, the essential clues for the correct interpretation of the meaning of the assertion. Referring both to Deuteronomy 6:4 and Exodus 34:6–7 (in which Yahweh himself proclaims his identity to his people, and does so in relational and contextually significant ways seemingly less compatible with the classical systematic approach to divine attributes), Goldingay writes that "the statements are inextricably linked to narrative; they gain their meaning from the narrative contexts in which they are set. But they are open to being reflected on as statements offering insight on God's nature that hold beyond their narrative context."[55] Does the Word speak

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[54] Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 32.
[55] Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," 134.

"beyond" its "narrative context?" Yes. But always in terms of and through that context.

The Centrality of Biblical Theology. Does the criticism of the abstractive tendency of systematics necessarily mean the death of systematic theology? Some undoubtedly have said that it does. Others have tried different routes. Although writing from a decidedly postmodern context, Stanley Grenz has helpfully asked the question: What would systematic theology look like if we were to step out of the traditional model and cast a systematic along narrative lines? He answers his own question by saying that "we must view theology in terms of its proper context within the narrative of God's action in history."[56]

Taking his commitment to story from the biblical drama of redemption rather than postmodern notions about the sociology of knowledge, Richard Lints provides us with both a description of the rationalist loci method and a challenge to traditional notions of system:

> It is important to ask whether the conception of doing theology by stringing together Christian doctrines like pearls in a necklace might not be undermining the essential unity of the biblical message. As it stands, evangelical theology tends to deal with each component part individually, at best stitching things together after the fashion of a patchwork quilt. There may be interesting patterns evident in each of the individual pieces, but there is no pattern that holds the quilt together overall, other than its diversity.[57]

Henry Vander Goot offers the same criticism of classical systematic theology, but in even more pointed language:

> When we fail to notice the character of Scripture as dramatic narrative, we reduce the text of Scripture to abstractions of the mind. We tap the conflict out of the text and subsequently out of our view of human life as well . . . . Rationalism and the narrative form of Scripture are incompatible.[58]

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[56] Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 72.

[57] Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 261.

[58] Henry Vander Goot, *Interpreting the Bible in the Church and Theology* (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1984), 69.

Following in the redemptive-historical tradition of Geerhardus Vos, both Vander Goot and Lints argue that there may be better ways to "package theology" (Lints' phrase) than the rationalist method of traditional systematics. In the pursuit of timeless truth, classical systematics obscured both the biblical storyline and the unitary inter-relatedness of Scripture that the story provides. The historical referents of the biblical Word—the mighty acts of God in creation, preservation, and redemption—if not annulled, are rendered theologically less relevant. Thus, Lints appropriately comments:

> Evangelicals have traditionally emphasized the *speech* of God by encapsulating it in doctrinal formulations. In doing so, they have neglected the *acts* of God. They have ably defended the historicity of these acts, but they have virtually ignored the centrality of their theological character.[59]

The diminution of historical reference sidelines the dramatic movement of story, and the Bible is—at the very least and at its most fundamental level—a story, the telling of God's historical relationship with mankind and creation. The Bible does not present itself as a theological dictionary or doctrinal treatise, and the content of scriptural revelation does not exist in isolated compartments, awaiting an external theological framework to provide some sort of order. The Bible has an order—the redemptive-historical story it tells. Lints contends, and I agree, that the framework of the theological enterprise "ought to be linked to the actual *structure* of the biblical text and not merely to the *content* of the Bible."[60] While the topical question, what does the Bible teach?, is legitimate, the answer is always regulated and mediated by the redemptive-historical story. The biblical way is the way of the story. The metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation, along with the embeddedness of that grand drama in covenantally particular episodes, constitutes the subject of the divine accommodation that is biblical revelation. As such, the biblical story itself—and not some rational structure extraneous to Scripture—ought to regulate the framework by which we theologize about God and his ways. I believe that Goldingay is right when he argues that the overall narrative structure of Scripture is not accidental to the Christian faith and our theological reflection upon the faith, but rather corresponds to the very nature of the biblical faith,

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[59] Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 264n8.
[60] Ibid., 271.

and as such should inform and drive our reflection.[61] "The biblical gospel is not a collection of timeless statements such as God is love. It is a narrative about things God has done."[62]

This is no less true of the New Testament. While the Gospels clearly have a narrative feel, Christians have often been tempted to think of the New Testament epistles, especially Paul's writings, as strictly discursive in character. Paul wrote doctrinal treatises, not narrative.[63] What is missed, however, is what Bruce Longenecker calls the "narrative bedrock,"[64] or what N. T. Wright has characterized as the "narrative world" that undergirds all of Paul's writings.[65] Herman Ridderbos was on to the same insight when he observed that Paul was more interested in the history of salvation (*historia salutis*) than an order of salvation (*ordo salutis*).[66] The Old Testament story of God calling a people who will be his mediators in the undoing of the Adamic fall—a story that finds its acme and fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah—is not only a recurrent theme but also a controlling heuristic of Paul's thought. This is displayed with special vividness in the Epistle to the Romans.[67]

What I am arguing for here is a redemptive-historical approach toward theological reflection, one that seeks to respect not only the content of Scripture, but also the methodologies and pedagogies of the biblical text. I. Howard Marshall has recently called for the same thing:

> My intuition is that if we are directed by Scripture as our authority in *what* we are to believe and do, then we are also directed in our investigation of *how* we

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[61] Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," 130; *Old Testament Theology*, 28–29, 40–41.

[62] Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 31.

[63] It is still common within evangelical and Reformed circles to hear the book of Romans described as Paul's systematic theology, by which is meant that Paul is developing doctrine rather than telling or engaging in story.

[64] Bruce W. Longenecker, "The Narrative Approach to Paul," *Currents in Biblical Research* 1, no.1 (2002): 88–111.

[65] N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1992), 403–8.

[66] Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), e.g., 14, 205–6, 214ff, 221–22.

[67] Notice Paul's description of the gospel in 1:1–3 as the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes in Jesus Christ, the covenant indictment against all sin, including the presumptions of God's Old Testament people (1:18–3:20), Abraham as the father of all believers (chapter 4), Christ as the second Adam (5:12–21), the law and sin (2:12–29; 7:7–25), the groaning of creation for the consummation (8:18–30), the future of the Jewish nation (chapters 9–11), the restoration of the law as love (chapters 12–14), Christ the hope of Jews and Gentiles alike (chapter 15). All of these constitute what is essentially a reflection upon the significance of the Old Testament story of Israel in light of the coming of Christ.

are to interpret Scripture by Scripture itself rather than by any overriding external authority. What we need, then, is some kind of *scriptural* approach to the problem of development and interpretation.[68]

What we see, both within the pages of Scripture itself and in the early development of Christian theology, is that the telling of the story (ultimately the story of Jesus as the fulfillment and goal of Israel's story) in contextually relevant ways and for the sake of contemporary Christian practice was fundamental both to the identity of the people of God and their understanding of the faith. Although often ignored, this is implicit in the New Testament language of "doctrine" and "tradition." Doctrine (διδαχη), as it was understood by the writers of the New Testament,[69] included the gospel story of Jesus, for doctrine was the teaching of God's redemptive Word and deed.[70] We might think of doctrine as both the declaration of the redemptive drama and its application to the faith and life of the people of God. It seems to me that Vanhoozer is certainly in the ballpark when he comments that "my view is that doctrine is direction for the church's fitting participation in the ongoing drama of redemption."[71] Tradition, that which is handed down, is often a virtual synonym for doctrine in Paul, so much so that the editors of the NIV rendered

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[68] I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible*, 48. David Wells was heading in the same direction when he wrote that "the biblical revelation is worked out within a *historical framework* comprised of God's redemptive acts. It is a framework within which meaning is given by God . . . . Systematic theologians make a great mistake if they allow their systematic interests to carry them away too far from the kind of framework for understanding which Geerhardus Vos provided for us so well" (David F. Wells, "On Being Framed," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 [1997]: 299).

[69] Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 6–7. The New Testament occurrences of διδαχη are not in and of themselves transparent as to the meaning of the term (Rom. 16:17; Eph. 4:14; 1 Tim. 1:3, 10; 4:6; 6:3; Tit. 1:9; 2:1, 10; Heb. 6:1). The meaning must be inferred from the texts. The same holds for διδασκαλια, "the teaching," or "that which is taught" (e.g., Mark 7:7; Col. 2:22; 1 Tim. 1:10).

[70] So Vos could say that "without God's acts the words would be empty, without His words the acts would be blind" (Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology," 10, quoted in Richard Lints, "Two Theologies or One? Warfield and Vos on the Nature of Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 [1992]: 247).

[71] Kevin Vanhoozer, "Into the Great 'Beyond': A Theologian's Response to the Marshall Plan," in Marshall, *Beyond the Bible*, 87. A bit later in his essay, Vanhoozer helpfully expands upon this definition: "To exposit the Scriptures is to participate in the canonical practices—practices that form, inform, and transform our speaking, thinking, and living. To interpret the Bible in this manner is to make the church itself into an exposition, or what Paul calls a 'spectacle' (*theatron*) to the world (1 Cor. 4:9). This theatrical metaphor highlights the pastoral, and practical, function of doctrine. Doctrine, I submit, is an aid in understanding the *theodrama*—which God has done in Jesus Christ. As such, doctrine provides direction for our fitting participation in the ongoing drama of redemption. It is the canonical script that guides the church's performance of the way, the truth, and the life" (ibid., 94).

παραδοσις ("tradition") as "teaching" in 1 Corinthians 11:2 and 2 Thessalonians 2:15 and 3:6. What was it that was handed down or taught? What was the doctrine that Paul was so careful to teach and protect throughout his epistles? It was the Gospel, the story of the fulfillment of Old Testament messianic promise in Jesus Christ.

Is it possible that our theological reflection is tied to the biblical story in such a way that the "eventedness" and particularity of the drama of redemption are theologically crucial ("if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" [1 Cor. 15:14])? Is it also possible that, if our theologies do not take stock of the historical and organic nature of Scripture and the Christian faith, they risk the very loss of the biblical truth? And is it possible that—to borrow the phrase from Dorothy Sayers—the dogma is the drama? If this is so, it will mean that systematics needs to take a step closer to biblical theology and at least a step or two away from philosophical theology. Systematic theology is about the contextualization of the faith, not an exercise in abstraction. It must be bounded by the biblical story—in method as well as in content.

We need to carefully think through the relationships between systematic theology and biblical theology and between systematic theology and biblical hermeneutics. The academic discipline of biblical theology originally arose in the eighteenth century as an alternative to systematic theology. It was a descriptive discipline that sought to recover the beliefs of the biblical authors, and therein saw no rationale for dogmatics. Yet, the integration of biblical theology into the curriculum of Princeton Seminary under the leadership of B. B. Warfield and Geerhardus Vos did not pit the two disciplines against one another. Indeed, from the beginning of Vos' tenure as professor of biblical theology, systematics was understood as being dependent upon biblical theology. One might well expect Vos to think of all theological reflection as being dependent upon Scripture. He held that systematics is as much a biblical reflection as is biblical theology. The two disciplines differ not in content but merely in mode of organization, biblical theology being organized according to the history of redemption and systematics according to a thematic or topical framework.[72] Warfield argued along similar lines. He envisioned a process of

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[72] Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 4-5.

dependence in which exegesis forms the foundation for biblical theology, and biblical theology in turn funds systematics.[73]

> Biblical Theology is not, then, a rival of Systematics; it is not even a parallel product of the same body of facts provided by exegesis; it is the basis and source of Systematics. Systematic Theology is not a concatenation[74] of a scattered theological data furnished by the exegetic process; it is a combination of the already concatenated data given it by Biblical Theology.[75]

Why can the theologian not move straight from exegesis to systematics? Warfield recognized that such a move lends itself to a simplistic proof-text approach to Scripture. The biblical materials exist within an organic-historical unity from which they can never be truly abstracted. Even though systematics focuses upon topical concerns and views Scripture as a completed whole—a canon—the theologian "must recognize the organic unity of the data of Scripture and in this must see the facts not in inductive isolation from one another but in organic relation to one another."[76] While systematic theology presents the biblical materials topically, and hence in a fashion that is not identical to the narrative pattern of Scripture, it must be careful to respect and, whenever possible, work from the historical structure of the text.[77] No contemporary theologian has argued this point as consistently or for so long as Richard Gaffin. The tendency toward abstraction is so strong in the western theological tradition, the habit of treating the Bible as the servant of a system—as a collection of disconnected proof-texts—is so second-nature to us, the

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[73] Lints notes that "Wafield suggested that biblical theology provides the soil out of which systematic theology grows. To use another metaphor, exegesis is not the proper parent of systematic theology but rather its grandparent. Biblical theology is the proper parent. The data for systematic theology is not individual texts or individual results of exegesis of individual texts but rather the completed conception of revealed truth offered by biblical theology" (Lints, "Two Theologies or One?" 237).

[74] *Concatenation*: that which is linked or united into a sequence or system.

[75] B.B. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 7 (1896); quoted in Lints, "Two Theologies or One?" 238.

[76] Lints, "Two Theologies or One?" 239.

[77] Lints notes that the theological method in which systematics is dependent upon biblical theology put forth by Warfield and Vos was an innovative departure from the proof-text method of Charles Hodge (Lints, "Two Theologies or One?" 244n35). He poignantly comments that "it is unfortunate that they have not exercised the influence on later evangelical theological method which their work merits" (ibid., 243n34). Perhaps this was due, at least in part, to the fact that Warfield himself was not very successful in integrating the historicity of the biblical text into his own systematic endeavors. "It is as if he is standing on the edge of the promised land convinced that it must be entered and yet not sure of how to embark on the journey" (ibid., 250).

practice of viewing the Bible "as a manual of 'timeless' first principles or static truths" is so common, that the systematician needs to be ever reminded that these are biblical vices, not theological virtues.[78] And that is achieved by anchoring systematics in biblical theology, which focuses upon the very historical and covenantal dynamics that systematics is apt to ignore. If it is true that the biblical message is not merely *situated* within a narrative structure—the progressively unfolding story of creation, fall, Israel, and Jesus—but that the overall theme and point of Scripture *is* that epic story itself, then a systematic theology that fails to think historically and narratively as it thinks topically will not only miss the vitality of Scripture, but also be in danger of sacrificing the integrity and meaning of the text.

Systematics and Hermeneutics. Both Warfield and Murray[79] insisted that systematic theology is dependent upon the proper exegesis of Scripture. The tasks of the exegetical and biblical theologian precede the synthetic and integrative calling of the systematic theologian. A reasonable correlate of this contention is that systematics also bears a dependent relationship to biblical hermeneutics. Where biblical theology is naturally organized textually and historically, systematic theology has tended to access the Bible without reference to the historical nature of biblical revelation and without much attention to contextual issues—that is to say, without respect to sound biblical hermeneutics. But if systematics asks the question, what does the whole Bible teach about X?, then it is inherently connected to *what the Bible teaches*—that is, what Scripture intends to teach, or even what the text demands. Does not the principle "do not go beyond what is written" hold for our theologizing? The single most important principle of hermeneutics—figuring out the meaning of a communication—is *authorial intent*. Just as we expect people to interpret our words according to our intention, so too do the authors of Scripture.[80]

Remember the analogy of faith? There is a closely related traditional principle of biblical hermeneutics called *the analogy of Scripture.* All this means is

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[78] Gaffin, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 292; "The Validity of Reformed Dogmatics," 22.

[79] Murray, "Systematic Theology," 1–2.

[80] Stephen Fowl has well defended the notion of authorial intention for hermeneutics, not as an ideal subjective moment in the author's mind but as the "communicative intent" revealed within the text (Stephen Fowl, "The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture," in *Between Two Worlds*, 71–87).

that Scripture interprets Scripture. But the principle itself has been interpreted in two different ways. Systematic theologians have taken it to mean that different texts which speak to the same topic can be brought together, and the clearer text sheds light on the less clear text. Thus, Scripture interprets Scripture. In biblical theology, however, the analogy of Scripture is understood a bit differently. Richard Gaffin explains the principle this way:

> To say that Scripture interprets itself means that it has one pervasive sense—a unified meaning. Because it is God's word, the Bible is a unity, so that any one part has its place within the unified teaching of the whole. A particular passage is located within a pattern of God-given contexts which can only serve to clarify. The pervasive meaning of Scripture should be brought to bear on any single portion. Biblical revelation is self-elucidating because it has an organic, unified structure.[81]

In short, the principle is simply *follow the story*. Interpret the text as it gives itself to be read. Read the text as it was intended to be read. Do not read the text contrary to the author's intention or contrary to its character. Carl Armerding suggests that the dogmatic approach toward Scripture—reading it by looking for timeless doctrinal verities rather than seeing it as an unfolding story of God's redemptive ways with his creatures—dictates to the text how we will allow it to speak to us. We stop being listeners and become speakers. We become dictators rather than cooperators. Being a listener, however, is a matter of submitting to the text, allowing the biblical authors to speak, and "seeking within the story itself the guidelines for its exegesis."[82]

While not every biblical text is narrative in genre, the ultimate context that controls any text is the overarching story that the Bible tells. "In the final analysis the analogy of Scripture is the analogy of parts in an historically unfolding and differentiating organism."[83] The unity of Scripture—or the Christian faith—is not found within an extra-biblical system or rational principle; it is in the biblical story of the divine purpose for our world. This suggests that the unfolding drama of God's redemptive ways ought to be both

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[81] Richard Gaffin, "Introduction," xvii.

[82] Carl Armerding, "Faith and Method in Old Testament Study: Story Exegesis," in P. E. Satterthwaite and D. F. Wright, eds., *A Pathway Into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 46.

[83] Gaffin, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 294.

the fundamental control upon exegesis and the informing principle of theological reflection.

This is not a new idea in any way. The second century Rule of Faith (which would become what we call the Apostles' Creed) delineated the faith for believers. To counter heretical interpretations of the faith, Irenaeus and Tertullian used the Rule to declare that the Bible is about the creative and redemptive work of the triune God.[84] Yet, the Rule was not so much a summary of the content of the Christian faith as it was a direction for the proper interpretation of Scripture. Its broadly narrative form identifies what the Bible is about. Biblical religion is a declaration of the works of the triune God in the progressively historical work of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. That which Christians are to believe, that which they are to proclaim to the world, is not a collection of static concepts, but a story. And that story is the fundamental principle for the true interpretation of Scripture.[85] Thus, the Rule of Faith provided something of a regulative principle for biblical interpretation: Read the Word according to the story. Look for the declaration of the great things God has done.[86]

Does the emphasis upon authorial intention, the narrative analogy of Scripture, and the early church's use of the Rule of Faith as a hermeneutical guide declare the systematic use of the analogy of Scripture illegitimate? No, but it does set limits upon it. John Murray put it this way: "Texts will not thus be forced to bear a meaning they do not possess nor forced into a service they cannot perform."[87] In other words, the systematic use of the analogy of Scripture should not violate the authorial intention of the text. But this can be stated more positively and concretely. Echoing Vos, Lints aphoristically writes that "theology, in its content and form, ought to be what the Scripture irresistibly demands."[88]

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[84] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.9.3; 1.10.1, 3; Tertullian, *Prescription*, 1.19.

[85] See Paul M. Blowers, "The *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith," *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997): 199–228; Henri Blocher, "The 'Analogy of Faith' in the Study of Scripture: In Search of Justification and Guide-lines," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 5 (Spring 1987): 17–38.

[86] Robert Wall writes that "there is a sense in which biblical interpretation that is truly Christian in content and result is the by-product of the interpreter whose theological convictions conform to the Rule of Faith" (Robert Wall, "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The 'Rule of Faith' in Theological Hermeneutics," in *Between Two Horizons*, 101).

[87] Murray, "Systematic Theology," 21.

[88] Lints, "Two Theologies or One?" 247.

Although Christian theologians have always seen the Bible as authoritative for their reflection, it is often difficult to discern just how the Bible relates to a lot of systematic theology, even within evangelical and Reformed circles. The way Scripture is often employed implies that "whatever is not forbidden is permitted." If we can make something fit with all the statements of the Bible—read as decontextual propositions—we may employ any idea within our theology. But just because we *can* do so does not mean that we *should*. This is the great limitation of thinking of systematic theology as a fundamentally rational enterprise. The law of non-contradiction does not include—nor does it suggest—any positive or constructive ethic for understanding historical or personal dynamics, or for reading texts for that matter. What is needed is a regulative principle for theological construction. Whatever is not demanded by the Word of God is forbidden. Our theologies must tell the story.[89] Simply because an idea might seem justified by a biblical statement, it does not follow that the text should be so understood. Romans 4:17 says that God "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." This text has often been used as a proof-text for the doctrine of creation out of nothing. Taken as a refrigerator-magnet sort of declaration, one can see how the text might be so used. God calls into being what does not exist. *Creatio ex nihilo*. But, of course, that is not what Paul is saying in Romans 4:17 at all. It is not a reference to the original act of creation, but to God's call of Abraham to faith and fatherhood. To use the text as a proof-text for the doctrine of creation out of nothing is illegitimate, for this ignores the communicative intention of the text, the purpose of the statement within its context in the book of Romans, and its context within the unfolding biblical story. As Christopher J. H. Wright has stated the point, "the text must govern the framework, and not the other way round."[90] What is the framework of which Wright speaks? The biblical drama of redemption—the story that comes from the biblical text—which is the special focus of biblical theology.

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[89] See John Frame, "Crucial Questions About the Regulative Principle," *Christian Counterculture Newsletter*, May 23, 2005: 1–7, for an appeal for expanding the regulative principle beyond Reformed worship.

[90] Christopher J. H. Wright, "Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt*, 138.

The Challenge of Biblical Theology

I have spoken of Scripture as a regulative principle or informing story for the theological enterprise—both in terms of its communicative intent for any particular text and as the cosmic narrative of God's unfolding work of the restoration of all things. However, I have not sought to produce a rule book or a how-to for doing theology. My concern is to apply the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* for the sake of theological reflection. I feel quite comfortable in this enterprise, for if our theological labors do not take place for the sake of bringing the Word of God home to the contemporary church, then those efforts are in vain. Anchoring systematic theology in biblical theology, with its attendant emphases in the biblical story and authorial intention, does not dictate how systematics must be done. But biblical theology does offer some positive challenges to systematics.

First, biblical theology challenges systematic theology to do justice to the historical character of Scripture. The tendency to abstraction which moves theological reflection toward ahistorical formulations of timeless truths and thus obscures the historical-covenantal dynamic of Scripture must be resisted. As we move away from the historical dynamic and toward the reductively thematic, we will also experience a commensurate loss of biblical meaning. Stated as a positive prescription, persons and events take precedence over ideas and rational neatness in biblical reflection. While inferential relationships are not to be ignored in our systematic endeavors, personal relationships take priority and are the ultimate referents of systematic analysis. Historicity, beginnings and endings, events, development and growth, continuity and discontinuity, and the character of persons must all be part of, or at least accounted for by, the theologian's *system*.[91] The systematic theologian must always respect the nature of Scripture as a *history* of redemption. Put in simplest terms, the narrative structure of Scripture encourages the systematic theologian to think in historical and storied ways, even as he pursues the topical agenda. At the very least, systematic theology needs to reflect on

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[91] I argue this point at length in a number of essays: "God: Idea or Person? The Necessity of Historical Revelation to a Personal Knowledge of God," *In Covenant* 12, no. 2 (April/May 1997); "Scripture and Theology: Doctrinal Facts, a Community's Narrative, or Redemptive-Historical Fabric?" *Pro Rege* 24, no. 3 (March 1996); "Climbing Out of Lessing's Ditch: History and the Christian Faith," in Michael Bauman, ed., *God and Man: Perspectives on Christianity in the 20th Century* (Hillsdale, Mich.: Hillsdale College Press, 1995).

matters that have not often appeared within the traditional *loci* of the discipline. What is the nature of history? Why is story the most foundational form of biblical communication? Why are events so crucial to the gospel story? I suspect that if systematicians were to take up such questions, we would be weaned away from the traditional trajectory of seeing natural religion as the foundation for revealed religion, and in so doing discover greater depths—scandalous depths!—in the personal particularity of the God declared in the biblical story.

Second, biblical theology reminds the systematician that the Bible is more than a repository of things to know. If our theological labors are to provide direction for walking in the way of truth, they need to do more than merely describe the world. They must also generate an identity for those who are called to live the life of faith within the world. This is one of the particular advantages of story over other forms of discourse. Story seeks to depict not merely a way of *seeing* the world, but also a way of *being* within it. As Kevin Vanhoozer aptly notes, "To become a Christian is not to become a subscriber to a philosophy; it is to become an active participant in God's triune mission to the world."[92] And the only way to become such a "participant" is by entering into the story, to take it as our own. The biblical story is not a tale told about strangers, people to whom we have no relation. It is the story of the heirs to the faith of Abraham. It is *our* story, and as such invites us to indwell it. As God's identity is known only by way of the story—his ongoing involvement in his creation with his people—so our true identity can only be known in the same way. This is precisely what Christian faith is all about: the formation of Christian identity as the world of Scripture becomes our world as well. Vanhoozer has recently made the same point:

> As C.S. Lewis knew, stories too are truth bearers that enable us both to "taste" and to "see," or better, to experience as concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction. What gets conveyed through stories, then, is not simply a proposition but something of reality itself. For example, the biblical narrative does not simply convey information about God but displays God's triune identity itself as this is manifest through the creative and redemptive work of his two hands. One can state "that God is good" in a proposition, but it takes a narrative to "taste and see that the Lord is good."[93]

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[92] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 102.

[93] Ibid., 109. Some years ago, Harvie Conn put it this way: "From a redemptive-historical perspective the interpreter affirms not only that he or she stands in the same continuum of the presence of the kingdom as, for example, the apostle Paul; the interpreter also affirms that, just as biblical theology

Third, biblical theology reminds us that our systems are just that—*our* creations. Trevor Hart's comment is a sober relativization of the systematic agenda: "Christian Scripture offers no neat system, and ambitious attempts to systematize it ought to attract suspicion rather than assent in the first instance from those whose concern is faithfulness to the text, and acknowledgment of its authority in the integrally related tasks of theological reflection and Christian discipleship."[94] Scripture does not exist to serve our systems. Just the reverse. Theological reflection takes place for one reason: to help us think through the biblical faith in our moment in history. As such, theology is the servant of the Word of God and faith. Systematics is not the goal of Scripture, but a means for our application of the biblical world to our own.

Finally, as biblical theology is oriented to the historical unfolding of God's redemptive ways, it reminds us of the grand purpose of Scripture—a purpose that all else serves—namely, that biblical religion is not firstly or ultimately about contacting a cognitive deposit of ideas or facts, but coming into a living and vital relationship with the Savior and King who is revealed to us in the biblical Word. When the people of God read the Bible, we are not simply attending words on a piece of paper, or even a story found in a book. We are attending, through the medium of the written word, Jesus Christ our LORD, who is first a person, not an idea or a proper noun. The Bible is referential to the acts of God in history—his *covenantal relationship* with his people. This principle must inform the theologian as he uses this Word and must regulate how he reads it.

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demands fullest justice to the cultural context of redemptive history, so the commentator too must look at his or her own situational context with care. Our contemporary setting is part of that flow of redemptive history that is addressed by the Scriptures" (Harvie Conn, *Eternal Word, Changing Worlds,* 228).

[94] Hart, "Systematic—In What Sense?" 342.