

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Biblical and Systematic Theology: A Digest of Reformed Opinion on Their Proper Relationship

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### Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield<sup>1</sup>

Biblical Theology is "the ripest fruit of Exegetics, and Exegetics has not performed its full task until its scattered results in the way of theological data are gathered up into a full and articulated system of Biblical Theology ... The task of Biblical Theology, in a word, is the task of coordinating the scattered results of continuous exegesis into a concatenated whole, whether with reference to a single book of Scripture or to a body of related books or to the whole Scriptural fabric ....

"The relation of Biblical Theology to Systematic Theology is based on a true view of its function. Systematic Theology is not founded on the direct and primary results of the exegetical process; it is founded on the final and complete results of exegesis as exhibited in Biblical Theology. Not exegesis itself, then, but Biblical Theology, provides the material for Systematics. 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 of the scattered theological data furnished by the exegetic process; it is the combination of the already concatenated data given to it by Biblical Theology. It uses the individual data furnished by exegesis, in a word, not crudely, not independently for itself, but only after these data have been worked up into Biblical Theology and have received from it their final coloring and subtlest shades of meaning - in other words, only in their true sense, and after Exegetics has said its last word upon them ....

"We gain our truest Systematics not by at once working together the separate dogmatic statements in the Scriptures, but by combining them in their due order and proportion as they stand in the various theologies of the Scriptures. Thus we are enabled to view the future whole not only in its parts, but in the several combinations of the parts; and, looking at it from every side, to obtain a true conception of its solidity and strength, and to avoid all exaggeration or falsification of the details in giving them place in the completed structure. And thus we do not make our theology, according to our own

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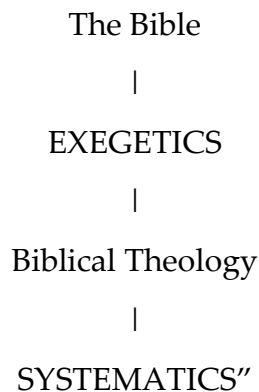
<sup>1</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," in *Studies in Theology* (Oxford, 1932), pp. 49-87. The article originally appeared in *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 7 (1896) 243-71.

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pattern, as a mosaic, out of the fragments of the Biblical teaching; but rather look out from ourselves upon it as a great prospect, framed out of the mountains and plains of the theologies of the Scriptures, and strive to attain a point of view from which we can bring the whole landscape into our field of sight ....

“The immediate work of exegesis may be compared to the work of a recruiting officer: it draws out from the mass of mankind the men who are to constitute the army. Biblical Theology organizes these men into companies and regiments and corps, arranged in marching order and accoutered for service. Systematic Theology combines these companies and regiments and corps into an army - a single and unitary whole, determined by its own all-pervasive principle. It, too, is composed of men - the same men which were recruited by Exegetics; but it is composed of these men, not as individuals merely, but in their due relations to the other men of their companies and regiments and corps. The simile is far from a perfect one; but it may illustrate the mutual relations of the disciplines, and also, perhaps, suggest the historical element that attaches to Biblical Theology, and the element of all-inclusive systematization which is inseparable from Systematic Theology. It is just this element, determining the spirit and therefore the methods of Systematic Theology, which, along with its greater inclusiveness, discriminates it from all forms of Biblical Theology, the spirit of which is purely historical ....

“Scientific Theology rests, therefore, most directly on the results of Biblical exegesis as provided in Biblical Theology .... It may be useful to seek to give a rough graphic representation of the relations of Systematic Theology as thus far outlined:



[Simplification of Warfield's original diagram]

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Geerhardus Vos<sup>2</sup>

"The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline" (Vos's 1894 Inaugural Address as Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary)

"The line of revelation is like the stem of those trees that grow in rings. Each successive ring has grown out of the preceding one. But out of the sap and vigor that is in this stem there springs a crown with branches and leaves and flowers and fruit. Such is the true relation between Biblical and Systematic Theology. Dogmatics is the crown which grows out of all the work that Biblical Theology can accomplish ... [Biblical Theology] will not so much prove these doctrines, as it will do what is far better than proof - make them grow out organically before our eyes from the stem of revelation."

"Introduction: The Nature and Method of Biblical Theology" (Chapter One of *Biblical Theology*)

"Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.

"In the above definition the term 'revelation' is taken as a noun of action. Biblical Theology deals with revelation as a divine activity, not as the finished product of that activity. Its nature and method of procedure will therefore naturally have to keep in close touch with, and so far as possible reproduce, the features of the divine work itself. The main features of the latter are the following:

"[1] *The historic progressiveness of the revelation-process*

"It has not completed itself in one exhaustive act, but unfolded itself in a long series of successive acts. In the abstract, it might conceivably have been otherwise. But as a matter of fact this could not be, because revelation does not stand alone by itself, but is (so far as Special Revelation is concerned) inseparably attached to another activity of God, which we call *Redemption*. Now redemption could not be otherwise than historically successive, because it addresses itself to the generations of mankind coming into existence in the course of history. Revelation is the interpretation of redemption; it must, therefore, unfold itself in installments as redemption does. And yet it is also obvious that the two processes

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<sup>2</sup> Vos's Inaugural Address, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," may be found in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (P&R, 1980), pp. 3-24. For a compare-and-contrast study exploring the views of Warfield and Vos on the relationship between biblical and systematic theology, see Richard Lints, "Two Theologies or One? Warfield and Vos on the Nature of Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992) 235-253.

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are not entirely co-extensive, for revelation comes to a close at a point where redemption still continues.

“In Biblical Theology the principle is one of historical, in Systematic Theology it is one of logical construction. Biblical Theology draws a line of development. Systematic Theology draws a circle. Still, it should be remembered that on the line of historical progress there is at several points already a beginning of correlation among elements of truth in which the beginnings of the systematizing process can be discerned ....

“Our dogmatic constructions of truth [are] based on the finished product of revelation ... There is a point in which the historic advance and the concentric grouping of truth are closely connected ....

“Biblical Theology relieves to some extent the unfortunate situation that even the fundamental doctrines of the faith should seem to depend mainly on the testimony of isolated proof-texts. There exists a higher ground on which conflicting religious views can measure themselves as to their Scriptural legitimacy. In the long run that system will hold the field which can be proven to have grown organically from the main stem of revelation, and to be interwoven with the very fibre of Biblical religion ....”

## John Murray<sup>3</sup>

“Biblical theology deals with the data of special revelation from the standpoint of its history; systematic theology deals with the same in its totality as a finished product. The method of systematic theology is logical, that of biblical theology is historical ....

“Our perspective is not biblical if we do not reckon with this history and with the process and progression which it involves. And our study of special revelation would not only be too restricted but it would also be dishonouring to God if it did not follow the lines of the plan which he himself pursued in giving us this revelation ....

“The covenantal institution is basic to any construction of redemptive history and revelation ... It should be apparent how indispensable to biblical theology is the covenant concept and how far removed from the biblical data our theology must be if it is not oriented to the successive unfoldings of covenant grace and relationship ....

“When biblical theology is conceived of as dealing with 'the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible', it must be understood that this specialized study of the

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<sup>3</sup> John Murray, “Systematic Theology,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. IV (Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), pp. 1-21. Originally published as two articles in *Westminster Theological Journal* 25, 2 (May, 1963) 133-142, and 26, 1 (Nov., 1963) 33-46.

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Bible, so far from being inimical to the interests of systematic theology, is indispensable to the systematic theology that is faithful to the Bible ....

“Biblical theology is indispensable to systematic theology. This proposition requires clarification. The main source of revelation is the Bible. Hence exposition of the Scripture is basic to systematic theology. Its task is not simply the exposition of particular passages. That is the task of exegesis. Systematics must coordinate the teaching of particular passages and systematize this teaching under the appropriate topics. There is thus a synthesis that belongs to systematics that does not belong to exegesis as such. But to the extent to which systematic theology synthesizes the teaching of Scripture, and this is its main purpose, it is apparent how dependent it is upon the science of exegesis ... What then of biblical theology? What function does it perform in this process? Biblical theology recognizes that special revelation did not come from God in one mass at one particular time. Special revelation came by process. It came progressively in history throughout ages and generations ... This process was not, however, one of uniform progression ... Redemption, as Geerhardus Vos observes, 'does not proceed with uniform motion, but rather is “epochal” in its onward stride.' ...

“If biblical theology deals with the history of revelation it must follow the progression which this history dictates. This is to say it must study the data of revelation given in each period in terms of the stage to which God's self-revelation progressed at that particular time ... In relation to our present interest, it is this principle that bears directly upon exegesis. Exegesis is the interpretation of particular passages. This is just to say the interpretation of particular revelatory data. But these revelatory data occur within a particular period of revelation and the principle which guides biblical theology must also be applied in exegesis. Thus biblical theology is regulative of exegesis.

“Systematic theology is tied to exegesis. It coordinates and synthesizes the whole witness of Scripture on the various topics with which it deals. But systematic theology will fail of its task to the extent to which it discards its rootage in biblical theology as properly conceived and developed ... The exegesis with which [systematic theology] is so intimately concerned should be regulated by the principle of biblical theology ... The fact is that only when systematic theology is rooted in biblical theology does it exemplify its true function and achieve its purpose.

“1. Systematic theology deals with special revelation as a finished product incorporated for us in Holy Scripture. But special revelation in its totality is never properly conceived of apart from the history by which it became a finished product. As we think of, study, appreciate, appropriate, and apply the revelation put in our possession by inscripturation, we do not properly engage in any of these [systematic] exercises except as the panorama of God's movements in history comes within our vision or at least forms

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the background of our thought ... Therefore, what is the special interest of biblical theology is never divorced from our thought when we study any part of Scripture and seek to bring its treasures of truth to bear upon the synthesis which systematic theology aims to accomplish. Furthermore, the tendency to abstraction which ever lurks for systematic theology is hereby counteracted. The various data are interpreted not only in their scriptural context but also in their historical context and therefore, as Vos says, 'in the milieu of the historical life of a people' because God has caused his revelation to be given in that milieu.

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"2. Perhaps the greatest enrichment of systematic theology, when it is oriented to biblical theology, is the perspective that is gained for the unity and continuity of special revelation. Orthodox systematic theology rests on the premise of the unity of Scripture, the consent of all the parts. It is this unity that makes valid the hermeneutical principle, the analogy of Scripture. A systematic theology that is faithful to this attribute of Scripture and seeks earnestly to apply it cannot totally fail of its function ... Thus the various passages drawn from the whole compass of Scripture and woven into the texture of systematic theology are not cited as mere proof texts or wrested from the scriptural and historical context to which they belong, but, understood in a way appropriate to the place they occupy in this unfolding process, are applied with that particular relevance to the topic under consideration. Texts will not thus be forced to bear a meaning they do not possess nor forced into a service they cannot perform. But in the locus to which they belong and by the import they do possess they will contribute to the sum-total of revelatory evidence by which biblical doctrine is established."

## Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.<sup>4</sup>

Gaffin observes "how much Vos and Murray are in agreement in their conception of biblical theology and its relationship to systematic theology."

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<sup>4</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *The New Testament Student and Theology*, Vol. III of *The New Testament Student*, ed. John H. Skilton (P&R, 1976), pp. 32-50. For a more recent statement of his position, with little modification, but with perhaps more in the way of specific illustrative examples of how biblical theology can bring greater vitality to Reformed dogmatics, see Gaffin, "The Vitality of Reformed Dogmatics," in *The Vitality of Reformed Theology: Proceedings of the International Theological Congress, June 20-24th 1994, Noordwijkerhout, The Netherlands*, J. M. Batteau, J. W. Maris, and K. Veling, eds. (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1994), pp. 16-50. Although I'm not persuaded by every detail, Gaffin's broader methodological proposals and the call for a biblical theological and eschatological approach to the traditional loci of Reformed dogmatics, specifically the *ordo salutis*, are warmly appreciated.



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He sees Vos and Murray leading us in a distinct direction which brings the following horizons into view:

"1. Biblical theology focuses on revelation as a historical activity and so challenges systematic theology to do justice to the historical character of revealed truth ... The 'tendency to abstraction' of which Murray speaks as an ever-present danger for systematics can be described more pointedly as a tendency to de-historicize, the tendency to arrive at 'timeless' formulations in the sense of topically oriented statements which do not adequately reflect the fact that God's self-revelation (verbal communication) is an integral part of the totality of his concrete activity in history as sovereign creator and redeemer, and which therefore obscure the historical, covenantal dynamic apart from which his relations to men and the world lack integrity and so lose their vitality and meaning. Vos observes that 'the circle of revelation is not a school, but a "covenant"' and that 'the Bible is not a dogmatic handbook but a historical book full of dramatic interest.'

"2. Biblical theology is indispensable to systematic theology because biblical theology is regulative of exegesis. This insight of Professor Murray ... provides the key to understanding not only that relationship [between biblical and systematic theology] but the true significance of biblical theology itself. How does biblical theology regulate exegesis? To ask this is to raise a methodological question of the most basic proportions.

"The answer to this question can be given perhaps most easily in terms of a consideration central to both exegesis and systematics, namely, the unity of the Bible ... 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. With a view to its content, then, a primary and essential qualification of the unity of the Bible is that that unity is redemptive-historical. The context that ultimately controls the understanding of a given text is not a literary framework or pattern of relationships but the historical structure of the revelation process itself. In the final analysis the analogy of Scripture is the analogy of parts in a historically unfolding and differentiating organism ...

"It does not appear to be going too far to say that in 'biblical theology,' that is, effective recognition of the redemptive-historical character of biblical revelation, the principle of context, of the analogy of Scripture, the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, so central in the Reformation tradition of biblical interpretation, finds its most pointedly biblical realization and application. All exegesis ought to be biblical-theological. To the extent that there is hesitation on this point the relationship between biblical and systematic theology will remain unresolved ...

"The term 'biblical theology' can also be used in a second sense, with the accent on its adjective 'biblical-theological' and referring not to a particular discipline but more

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broadly to a basic assessment of Scripture that involves methodological foundations and procedures essential to any correct exegesis of the text ... This is the more elemental sense, where the deepest ties with systematic theology come to light. The indispensability of biblical theology to systematic theology is the indispensability of exegesis to systematic theology, no more and no less.

"3. ... It seems important to hold out for the propriety of applying the noun [biblical theology] at least to parts of the actual revelation process recorded in Scripture. If it is correct that central to a proper conception of theology is reflection on salvation as revealed in Christ in the fulness of time, on the fulfillment of the covenant promises and the primary, binding implications of that fulfillment for the life of the church and the world, then much, if not all, of Scripture itself (either prospectively or retrospectively) is theology, indeed in portions of Paul's writings and the book of Hebrews theology of a decidedly 'systematic' and carefully argued kind. Recognition of this is important because it brings to light a factor of continuity, especially with the New Testament, that serves to keep the subsequent theological activity of the church firmly and organically rooted in the Scriptures, determined by them not only in its conclusions but also in the questions with which it begins. Reformed theology ought to challenge itself with the consistent awareness that its prolegomena are given by the Bible itself ....

"The New Testament itself is an embodiment of what Paul calls the manifold or many-sided wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10), that multiform wisdom that pertains to the unsearchable riches of Christ, to the administration of the mystery hidden in ages past, revealed in Christ, made known among all nations, and consummated at his return (vss. 8, 9; cf. vvs. 2-6; Rom. 16:25, 26; Col. 1:25-27; Eph. 1:10).

"Attention to the New Testament as a record of the consummation of the history of revelation brings us to consider it in terms of the multiplicity of the post-Pentecost witness to Christ. But in view of the organic nature of the revelation process, concern with its variety and diversity necessarily involves concern with the unity and coherence in which that diversity consists and apart from which it is ultimately unintelligible. And when these considerations are joined with the further recognition, again in view of the organic nature of the history of revelation, that the decidedly theological unity-in-diversity of the New Testament end point is not properly or comprehensively intelligible apart from attention to its rich and varied Old Testament roots, then the line between what is usually called New Testament (biblical) theology and systematic theology becomes difficult to detect.

"All this prompts the not entirely modest proposal, in view of objections that can be raised against the term 'systematic theology,' to discontinue its use and instead to use 'biblical theology' to designate the comprehensive statement of what Scripture teaches



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(dogmatics), always insuring that its topical divisions remain sufficiently broad and flexible to accommodate the results of the redemptive-historically regulated exegesis on which it is based. This, it would seem to me, is the ultimate resolution of the relational question raised in this essay."

To summarize Gaffin's formulation:

First, biblical theology, *as a discipline motivated by the dynamism of the historical perspective*, challenges systematic theology to avoid abstraction and to do justice to the historical, covenantal dynamic of divine revelation.

Second, biblical theology, *as an exegetical methodology which is self-consciously cognizant of the unity of Scripture*, guarantees that the hermeneutical process from exegesis to systematic doctrinal formulation is in accord with the Reformation's key interpretive principle, the analogy of Scripture.

Third, biblical theology, *as modeled in the canon itself, especially the New Testament (e.g., Paul's theological reflection on redemptive history)*, keeps the church's post-canonical theological reflection firmly and organically rooted in the Scriptures, determined not only in its conclusions but also in the questions it brings to the systematic enterprise.

## My Reflections

These selected readings have been placed primarily in historical order (although Warfield's piece is technically later than Vos's Inaugural Address by two years). One sees an organic and unified progression of thought. None of these theologians disagree fundamentally that the basic order should be: exegesis, biblical theology, systematic theology. However, one sees an increasing sharpness and refinement in understanding the precise the relationships involved.

Gaffin's formulation is, to my mind, the most mature and helpful discussion of all. I am not entirely comfortable with Gaffin's closing suggestion that we discontinue the term "systematic theology." But his concern is a valid one: biblical theology is already systematic to such a degree that the distinction between the two may be artificial. I think a better way of putting the matter is this. Both exegesis and systematic theology must be redemptive-historically regulated. Exegesis must be, because the ultimate and most determinative context of exegesis is the history of redemption. Systematic theology must be redemptive-historically regulated, because the finished product of revelation can never (or should never) shed the marks of the historical, covenantal process that led up to it.

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In other words, Gaffin insightfully suggests that biblical theology can be viewed from two different perspectives: either as an exegetical methodology, or as systematic reflection on the history of redemption. The former category is the usual way of thinking about it. The second category is based on Vos's profound insights into the fundamentally eschatological structure of Paul's thought in *The Pauline Eschatology*. Paul is a theologian, systematically reflecting on the meaning of redemptive history in light of the climactic redemptive historical event - the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Ridderbos is also helpful in this connection, for he shows us that systematic theology is not a totally post-canonical, ecclesiastical project (as Kuyper taught), but something that is evident within the canon itself (*Paul: An Outline of His Theology*). Thus biblical theology is not only an exegetical method, but, taking Paul as our guide, a theological method as well.<sup>5</sup>

## Postscript

In an e-mail dated February 1, 2000, Professor Gaffin graciously responded to my comments above:

"Just recently I have had called to my attention your digest on the relationship between Reformed BT and ST, on your web site. This survey, including your own reflections, is most helpful, and I plan to mention its availability to my classes beginning this coming semester.

"In your Reflections you write:

'I am not entirely comfortable with Gaffin's closing suggestion that we discontinue the term "systematic theology." But his concern is a valid one: biblical theology is already systematic to such a degree that the distinction between the two may be artificial. I think a better way of putting the matter is this....'

"I agree fully with your criticism (I have wished subsequently that I had not overstated myself that way; others have found it confusing). But I am grateful that you have clearly understood my concern and expressed it so well; yours is indeed 'a better way of putting the matter.'

"I would say also that another overall weakness, which I have eventually come to appreciate subsequent to writing the article, is that it does not take account of the role of historical theology, most especially the confessions of the church.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this see Gaffin, "Geerhardus Vos and the Interpretation of Paul," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. by E. R. Geehan (P&R, 1980), pp. 228-37.

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“More recently, I've found it helpful to use the analogy of plot analysis of a great epic drama to describe the BT/ST relationship. The history of redemption (set against the backdrop of creation and fall) is the 'drama,' and ST, under appropriate topics (God, man, creation, sin, salvation, etc.) and with an eye to the whole, discusses the actors and their interactions that constitute the 'plot.' In this way the topical concern of ST with what the Bible in its unity and as a whole teaches is maintained but in a way that keeps it focused on the unfolding of covenant history to its consummation in Christ (the concern of BT).”



Charles Lee Irons earned his BA in Greek at UCLA (1992), his MDiv at Westminster Seminary California (1996) and his PhD at Fuller Theological Seminary (2011) under the supervision of Donald Hagner and Seyoon Kim. His dissertation, [The Righteousness of God](#), was a lexical examination of the claim that *dikaiosyne theou* in Paul means “God’s covenant faithfulness.”

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