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Love Biblical Theology, but Don't Neglect Systematic Theology

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I love [biblical theology](#) (the study of each book of the Bible and its context within the whole Bible), which interprets God's self-revelation through the sacred unfolding storyline of Scripture. I love how it traces God's holy love for us in Christ from eternity past; through creation; through the fall; and through his salvation promised, accomplished, applied, and finally and forever consummated.

I love how biblical theology emphasizes the overarching narrative of Scripture. It rescues us from a coldly cerebral study of Scripture by seeing the Word through the eyes of God's eternal, sovereign, and triumphant love.

And I love how biblical theology is intentionally Christ-centered. By looking at God's revelation through this lens, we see Jesus gradually revealed not as an afterthought, but as God's final Word.

Forest and Trees

But current intrachurch debates have exposed a theological vulnerability in a too-dominant biblical theology. Believers today know far too little of *all* that God says about the issues we face. Biblical theology focuses so intently on the forest—the grand scheme

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of things. It can miss the individual trees, the countless doctrinal and ethical oaks, maples, redwoods, and sequoias that tower before us as enduring pillars of truth, law, and grace.

This suggests a critical role for [systematic theology](#) (the study of Christian doctrine under logical categories) which collects, examines, organizes, and (if rightly done) applies the many relevant biblical texts that disclose God's mind on any given topic. Biblical theology without systematic theology misses much of the propositional truth each text reveals. In my observation, too often the emphatic "storyline" approach fails to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the written Word.

2

Biblical theology without systematic theology misses much of the propositional truth each text reveals.

Biblical theology gives us the breadth of redemptive history while systematic theology gives us the depth. Biblical theology focuses on the progressively revealed storyline of God's Word. Systematic theology gathers the texts and truths that accompany—and are tucked into—that storyline so we can gain more complete and nuanced insight into God's mind.

Theological Reductionism

Failure to see what the whole of Scripture says about any given matter—and how it fits into God's unifying truth—has led Bible students to downplay or even jettison biblical doctrines. A narrow fixation on a few selected texts produces superficial theological reductionism. Biblical theology can offer broad categories and motifs. Systematic theology deepens and nuances what these mean, and why they matter.

Biblical theology introduces us to justice. Systematic theology helps us define, pursue, and establish justice, and to develop realistic expectations regarding it, this side of heaven.

Biblical theology mentions due process. Systematic theology defines the steps, aims, safeguards, and limits of that process (for both accuser and accused alike). Without it, we will never protect the victimized, or reduce wrongful convictions and character assassinations.

Biblical theology reveals the value of human life. Systematic theology clarifies when it starts, why it has value, and how it leads to a robust womb to tomb sanctity of life.

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Biblical theology highlights gender categories. Systematic theology defines what they are, why they exist, how they matter, what the gospel has to say about them, and how to assert their equality without equating their roles.

Biblical theology celebrates marriage. Systematic theology reveals its divine origin, enduring nature, gospel significance, temporary purpose, relative value, and needed graces.

Biblical theology shows us God's heart for the poor and the refugee. Systematic theology guides us toward the who, what, when, and how, in reflecting that heart to our neighbors.

Biblical theology calls us to Christian liberty. Systematic theology reveals the bases, contours, joys, and perils of that liberty.

Biblical theology reveals divine wrath. Systematic theology reveals why that wrath is reasonable, and how God will mete it out fairly, precisely as each one deserves. It exposes the irony that many have rejected what the Bible says about wrath because they haven't studied *all* that the Bible says about wrath.

Without systematic theology we cannot peer deeply into these issues. Instead, our lack of comprehensive awareness of Scripture will truncate our understanding and render our conclusions superficial at best.

No Cliffs Notes

As a pastoral veteran of nearly 40 years, my theological interest is more street-level than academic. I'm confronted daily with what happens when people are not thoroughly equipped with all that the Bible says for all of life ([2 Tim. 3:16-17](#)).

Pastors and teachers need to offer careful systematic counsel to inform everyday life. Those who lead us must avoid theological Cliffs Notes, shortcuts, and soundbites. They must give themselves instead to thorough page-after-page study of Scripture to deepen their reflections and nuance their conclusions.

There are two things I, as an ordinary Christian and pastor, can do. First, I can dig deeper through repeated cover-to-cover studies of Scripture, exploring whatever matters are relevant and prevalent in our times. To that end I can forgo any extra-biblical reading that makes me feel "well-studied" on a topic until I've done sufficient and in-depth Bible work.

Second, recognizing that many theologians are more skilled and well-studied, I can prioritize those whose works show comprehensive and nuance-rich biblical labor ([1 Tim.](#)

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[5:17](#); [2 Tim. 2:15](#)). I can choose to read those who have taken the Genesis through Revelation journey repeatedly with relentless and tireless diligence, and who show the fruit of it in what they write. I can ask if their books are full of Scripture. And I can check their cited texts to see if they are true to their contexts.

Between Fallible and Very Fallible

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In the end none of us will ever get anything *completely* right. But the more we are steeped in carefully considered systematized truth, the greater our chances of being *less* wrong. Our choice is between fallible and very fallible; between getting some things partly wrong and getting many things very wrong.

A recommitment to systematic theology will help us be *not as wrong*. The closer to comprehensive we are, the more coherent and comprehending we will become. And that is what the church's tense intramural theological debates so desperately need today.

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