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What is Biblical Theology and How Does it Relate to Systematic Theology?

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Theology is the study of God, God's character, God's actions in relation to the *cosmos*, and especially God's relationship to humanity (the character and history of humankind) in its responsive relationship to God within the panorama of the world and history, space and time.

WHAT ARE THE FOUR TYPES OF THEOLOGY?¹

The breadth and complexity of theology's subject matter are unrivaled among human sciences. This creates utterly unique challenges for theological reflection. Over the centuries, theology schools have developed ways of organizing this complexity that make theology more manageable. Presently, a common way of approaching this organization is to differentiate theology into four areas of focus. So what are the four types of theology?



The four types include biblical theology, historical theology, systematic (or dogmatic) theology, and practical theology. This arrangement was arrived at relatively recently, only settling in as such in the 19th and 20th centuries; the majority of the history of theology there was an assumed fluidity between these four. Rightly so: there is no consideration of the question of God in relation to humanity which does not invite all four of these dimensions of theology.

1. Biblical Theology

Biblical theology is the focus on the specific ways that the discreet and unique authorial voices in Scripture reflect on the larger questions of theology and the relationships of actions and activities between God and human creatures. Biblical theology is undertaken by persons who are formed and practiced by their Christian faith, account for the

¹ "What are the Four Types of Theology? Answers from a Theology School." Grace Theological Seminary. <https://seminary.grace.edu/what-are-the-four-types-of-theology-answers-from-a-theology-school/> Retrieved February 25, 2023.

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historical currents which feed and flow in and through Scripture, and do so with full awareness of how the particular voices in Scripture rise together as a canonical choir, coordinating together in ways that are ultimately reflected in dogmatic theology.

2. Historical Theology

Historical theology, likewise, is undertaken within the practices of faith, paying specific attention to all the movements of human history from the perspective of biblically informed views of space and time, accounting for the dynamic movements of dogmatic theology and the practices of the Church.

3. Systematic Theology

The practices and reflections of systematic theology take up the canonical currents of Biblical theology, appropriating the theological voices of history. It does so with the full consciousness that dogmatic theology serves the Church as the people of God in her efforts to live and act faithfully in relation to her Creator, and Lord and Savior in the power of the Holy Spirit. Dogmatic theology's goal is forming practiced faithfulness.

4. Practical Theology

Lastly, practical theology begins with the full consciousness that all the practices of the church and Christians are underwritten by theologies; biblical, historical and systematic. The goal of practical theology is to reflect intentionally on present practices and their ingredient theologies in order to critically discern their shape and character so as to deeper faithful practices, correct those which are sinful, and discern with greater clarity how to live out biblical Christian virtues.

The strength of a fourfold organization of theology is its capacity to simplify the overwhelming and demanding complexity of the question of God and humanity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit in all of the Trinity's relations with human creatures against the backdrop of creation in both time and space. The challenge, and temptation, of this artificial organization within theology schools and otherwise, is to think of any of the four as discreet or independent.

Scientific cosmology describes human beings as existing simultaneously in four dimensions: height, length, depth, and time, all of which are implicit and necessary for defining the being and actions of human beings. Likewise, should we think of the necessity and mutuality of the four types of theology?

We now turn to an examination of Biblical Theology.

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The *Moody Handbook of Theology* begins its discussion of Biblical Theology by stating that “the term *biblical theology* can be used in different ways. Although the usage adopted in this volume focuses on a special *method* of theological study, it should be understood that the term is widely used to refer to a *movement* that is basically antagonistic to evangelical faith. This negative usage is here considered and discarded before the legitimate meaning of biblical theology is discussed.”²

A MOVEMENT

First of all, then, this expression is used to describe the biblical theology *movement*. This was an outgrowth of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy. It began with the publication of Walther Eichrodt’s first volume of Old Testament theology in 1933 and ended with the publication of von Rad’s second volume of Old Testament theology in 1960.³ Brevard Childs suggests the movement experienced its demise in May 1963 with the publication of John A. T. Robinson’s *Honest To God*.

The movement initially was a reaction to liberalism and sought a return to an exegetical study of the Scriptures, particularly emphasizing a study of biblical words. Kittel’s monumental ten-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* is an outgrowth of that. As a movement, however, it never separated itself from its liberal underpinnings; it retained the historical-critical methodology. For example, in studying the gospels, adherents of the biblical theology movement applied the historical-critical methodology in attempting to discover which of the words attributed to Christ were actually spoken by Him.

While the movement recognized the weak message of liberalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it retained the liberal presuppositions concerning the Bible. Adherents held to the neo-orthodox view of revelation, taught evolution as a theory of origins, and emphasized the human aspect of the Bible rather than the divine. As a result, the movement was self-defeating. It was impossible to do a serious, exegetical study of the Scriptures while at the same time denying the authority of the Scriptures.⁴

² Enns, P. P. (1989). *The Moody handbook of theology* (p. 19). Moody Press.

³ J. Goldingay, “The Study of Old Testament Theology: It’s Aims and Purpose,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 26 (1975), p. 34.

⁴ For a conservative discussion, evaluation, and critique see G. F. Hasel, “Biblical Theology Movement” in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp. 149–52; and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Biblical Theology” in Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), pp. 95–97. For a non-conservative evaluation see Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) and James Barr, “Trends and Prospects in Biblical Theology,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974):265–82.

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A METHODOLOGY

A second way in which the term *biblical theology* is used is for that *methodology* that takes its material in an historically oriented manner from the Old and New Testaments and arrives at a theology. It is exegetical in nature, drawing its material from the Bible as opposed to a philosophical understanding of theology; it stresses the historical circumstances in which doctrines were propounded; it examines the theology within a given period of history (as in Noahic or Abrahamic eras) or of an individual writer (as Pauline or Johannine writings).

Biblical theology in the above-defined sense may be called “that branch of theological science which deals systematically with the historically conditioned progress of the self-revelation of God as deposited in the Bible.”⁵

Several elements are important to observe in this definition:⁶

SYSTEMATIZATION

Biblical theology investigates the periods of history in which God has revealed Himself or the doctrinal emphases of the different biblical writers are set forth in a systematic fashion. Biblical theology, while presented in a systematized form, is distinct from systematic theology that assimilates truth from the entire Bible and from outside the Scriptures in systematizing biblical doctrine. Biblical theology is narrower. It concentrates on the emphasis of a given period of history as in the Old Testament or on the explicit teaching of a particular writer as in the New Testament.

HISTORY

Biblical theology pays attention to the important historical circumstances in which the biblical doctrines were given. What can be learned from the Old Testament era of revelation? What were the circumstances in the writing of Matthew or John? What were the circumstances of the addressees of the letter to the Hebrews? These are important questions that help resolve the doctrinal emphasis of a particular period or of a specific writer.

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), p. 12. See also the helpful brief discussion in Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1986), p. 14.

⁶ Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 12–14.

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PROGRESS OF REVELATION

An orthodox doctrine that evangelicals have long held is the belief in progressive revelation; God did not reveal all truth about Himself at one time but revealed Himself “piecemeal,” portion by portion to different people throughout history (cf. Heb. 1:1). Biblical theology traces that progress of revelation, noting the revelation concerning Himself that God has given in a particular era or through a particular writer. Hence, God’s self-disclosure was not as advanced to Noah and Abraham as it was to Isaiah. An earlier book of the New Testament, such as James, reflects a more primitive view of the church than books written later, such as the pastoral epistles.

BIBLICAL IN NATURE

In contrast to systematic theology, which draws its information about God from any and every source, biblical theology has a narrower focus, drawing its information from the Bible (and from historical information that expands or clarifies the historical events of the Bible). Biblical theology thus is exegetical in nature, examining the doctrines in the various periods of history or examining the words and statements of a particular writer. This enables the student to determine the self-disclosure of God at a given period of history.⁷

Biblical theology, then, is the study of the doctrines of the Bible, arranged according to their chronology and historical background. In contrast to [systematic theology](#), which categorizes doctrine according to specific topics, biblical theology shows the unfolding of God’s revelation as it progressed through history. Biblical theology may seek to isolate and express the theological teachings of a specific portion of Scripture, such as the theology of the Pentateuch (first five books of the Old Testament) or the theology contained within John’s writings, etc. Or it may focus on a particular period of time, such as the theology of the unified kingdom years. Another branch of biblical theology may study a particular motif or theme in the Bible: a study of “the remnant,” for example, might search out how that motif is introduced and developed throughout Scripture.⁸

⁷ Enns, P. P. (1989). *The Moody handbook of theology* (pp. 19–21). Moody Press.

⁸ © Got Questions, <https://www.gotquestions.org/biblical-theology.html>. Retrieved February 25, 2023.

Many credit J. P. Gabler, a German biblical scholar, with beginning the field of biblical theology. As he was being inaugurated to a professorship in 1787, Gabler called for a sharp distinction between dogmatic (systematic or doctrinal) theology and biblical theology. For Gabler, biblical theology must be strictly a historical study of what was believed and taught in the various periods of biblical history, independent of modern denominational, doctrinal, philosophical, or cultural considerations. In general, the principles that Gabler espoused were correct, and he influenced the development of biblical theology for many years to come.

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SO WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

Here is a basic difference between systematic and biblical theology:

- ✦ **Systematic theology**⁹ asks, “What does the Bible as a whole say about angels?” and then examines every passage that concerns angelic beings, draws conclusions, and organizes all the information into a body of truth called “angelology.” The final product is, from Genesis to Revelation, the totality of God’s revealed truth on the subject.
- ✦ **Biblical theology**¹⁰ asks, “How did our understanding of angels develop throughout biblical history?” and then starts with the Pentateuch’s teaching about angels and traces God’s progressive revelation of these beings throughout Scripture. Along the way, the biblical theologian draws conclusions about how people’s thinking about angels may have changed as more and more truth was revealed. The conclusion of such a study is, of course, an understanding of what the Bible has to say about angels, but it also places that knowledge in the context of the “bigger picture” of God’s whole revelation. Biblical theology helps us see the Bible as a unified whole, rather than as a collection of unrelated doctrinal points.¹¹

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BIBLICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Jeff Augustine explains that the relationship between systematic theology and biblical theology is a close one. What is the difference?

✦ What is Biblical Theology?

Biblical theology focuses on the teachings of the individual authors and books of the Bible and places each teaching in the Scriptures' historical development. It is a presentation of the Old and New Testament writers' theological teachings within

However, it should be noted that there is no such thing as a study of the Bible with complete objectivity. Every interpreter brings certain presuppositions to the task. These biases have considerable influence upon the process of interpreting the Scriptures. As a result, the field of biblical theology is checkered with every imaginable opinion and variation of what the Bible teaches. Biblical theology is utterly dependent upon the hermeneutics of the theologian. The methods employed in interpreting Scripture are crucially important to biblical theology. One’s biblical theology can be no better than the methods he uses to interpret Scripture.

⁹ Recommended resource: *10 Things You Should Know about Systematic Theology*

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-systematic-theology/>

¹⁰ Recommended resource: *10 Things You Should Know about Biblical Theology*

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-biblical-theology/>

¹¹ © Got Questions, <https://www.gotquestions.org/biblical-theology.html>. Retrieved February 25, 2023.

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their historical setting. A Biblical theologian may ask, "What is the historical development of the teaching about the kingdom of God as it is seen throughout the history of the Old Testament and then of the New Testament?" The Biblical theologian analyzes the development of each doctrine through the historical development of scripture. They organize the topics historically and in the order that the bible presents the topics. Biblical theology's main task is expounding the theology found in the Bible in its own historical setting and its own terms, categories, and thought-forms. The Biblical theologian seeks to learn what the biblical authors believed and taught in the context of their own historical setting. It is primarily a descriptive type of theology. It is not initially concerned with the final meaning of the Bible's teachings or their relevance for today. This meaning and relevance is the task of systematic theology.

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➤ What is Systematic Theology?

Systematic theology uses Biblical theology, but it focuses on collecting and summarizing the teaching of all the biblical passages on a particular topic. The Systematic theologian may ask, "What does the entire Bible teach us today about heaven?" Systematic theology attempts to summarize the whole Bible's teaching on a particular subject with a concise statement or definition. It aims to develop a logically coherent and rationally defensible system of biblical teachings on theological topics such as the Trinity, the Church's doctrine, or spiritual gifts. Systematic theology is highly practical.

Biblical theology synthesizes the teachings of the Scriptures, and Systematic theology formulates these teachings for today. Biblical theology seeks to apply the Bible through the history of redemption, and systematic theology seeks to use the Bible as a whole for today.¹²

The following transcript of an interview with Vern Poythress will help illuminate this:

Different people have had different conceptions of both biblical theology and systematic theology, so it is wise to ask what people mean in both areas, as well as to look at the relation between the two areas.

¹² Jeff Augustine is affiliate faculty for the School of Biblical and Theological Studies for the College of Adult and Graduate Studies at Colorado Christian University
<https://www.ccu.edu/blogs/cags/2021/03/biblical-theology-vs-systematic-theology> Retrieved February 25, 2023.

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I would myself describe systematic theology as study of the Bible's teaching in which we try to synthesize and then summarize what the Bible as a whole teaches about all kinds of *topics*—God, man, Christ, sin, salvation, and so on.

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

At their best, biblical theology and systematic theology interact and help to deepen one another.

Systematic theology provides doctrines of God's sovereignty, of revelation, of God's purposes, and of the meaning of history that supply a sound framework of assumptions for the work of biblical theology.

Biblical theology at its best deepens the appreciation that systematic theology should have for the way in which, in interpreting individual texts and in uncovering their relation to a whole topic, the context of texts within the history of redemption colors the interpretation. Biblical theology may also bring to light new themes that can be the starting point for systematic-theological explorations into new topics that can receive fuller attention. For instance, the theme of life and death as it develops in the course of the history of revelation can become the starting point for discussing ethical questions about modern medicine and the issue of euthanasia.¹³

THE RELATION BETWEEN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY IS A TWO-WAY STREET

Luke Stamps writes at length explaining this two-way street:¹⁴

¹³ Posted at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/the-relationship-between-systematic-theology-and-biblical-theology/> Retrieved February 25, 2023.

¹⁴ Posted at <https://secundumscripturas.com/2014/05/30/and-systematic-the-relation-between-biblical-and-systematic-theology-part-1/> Retrieved February 25, 2023.

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Our ST¹⁵ informs and shapes our BT,¹⁶ and our BT in turn corrects and reshapes our ST. The relationship between BT and ST can be conceived of in terms of what hermeneutical philosophers call the “hermeneutic circle.” When we read any text, we bring certain assumptions about the text to the task of interpretation. As we read the parts of the text, we find our assumptions of the whole being reshaped—indeed, if we are reading rightly, we will find ourselves being reshaped by our interaction with the text. So there is a dialectical relationship between the parts and the whole and between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader. This is not to say that readers change the meaning of the text; the text’s authorially intended meaning remains the stable variable in the hermeneutical equation. But we have no access to the author’s intention apart from our own personal and communal interaction with the text that the author has given us.

BT and ST relate in a similar fashion. Every interpreter of Scripture comes to the task of interpretation with a ST already in place. It may not be fully developed. It may not be consciously held or acknowledged. But no one comes to the text as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. Instead, we come to the text with an already-formed understanding of God, humanity, sin, salvation, and so forth. Carl Henry once quipped that there are two kinds of presuppositionalists: those who admit it and those who don’t. If this is the case, then the best course of action is to be honest about our presuppositions—to lay our theological cards on the table, so to speak—rather than accepting the modernist illusion that we can simply do exegesis in any kind of objective or neutral fashion.

This understanding of the intimate relation between BT and ST reveals the weaknesses of one common way of conceiving the two disciplines. Gerhardus Vos is well-known for his distinction between BT and ST:

There is no difference in that one [of the two disciplines] would be more closely bound to the Scriptures than the other. In this they are wholly alike. Nor does the difference lie in this that the one transforms the biblical material, whereas the other would leave it unmodified. Both equally make the truth deposited in the Bible undergo a transformation: but the difference arises from the fact that the principle by which the transformation is effected differs in each case. In biblical theology this 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 (Vos, [Biblical Theology](#), 24-25).

In one sense, this way of distinguishing BT and ST is true enough. BT is more concerned with the plotline of Scripture and ST does ask more synthetic, topical questions. But in

¹⁵ ST hereinafter = Systematic Theology.

¹⁶ BT hereinafter = Biblical Theology.

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another sense, Vos's taxonomy is lacking for two reasons. First, the distinction turns out to be a bit too neat. There is a sense in which BT can be topical. For example, we can consider the topic of the temple/presence of God across the storyline of Scripture. Furthermore, there is sense in which ST follows closely the storyline of Scripture. The traditional ordering of the loci of ST reveals this narrative character. We begin where Genesis does: with God. We then move to creation, humanity, the fall and its effects, the redemption accomplished by Christ and applied by the Holy Spirit, the formative role of the church, and we end where Revelation does: the consummation of all things at the end of the age. So it turns out biblical theologians can be quite adept at drawing circles and systematic theologians at drawing lines.

Second, Vos's way of distinguishing the two disciplines fails to account for the ways in which the two relate to one another. Taken alone (in practice Vos was much better), Vos's distinctions make it seem as if BT and ST are simply two parallel and legitimate ways of carving up the biblical text. These distinctions fail to account for how the two disciplines can talk to one another, as it were. When systematicians appeal to the Bible, they should be doing so in ways that respect the textual, redemptive-historical, and canonical contexts of the biblical texts. In other words, they should be doing biblical theology. Similarly, when biblical theologians draw theological conclusions from the text (and they should be doing so; the modern division of labor in the theological disciplines has made us too wary to cross disciplinary lines and has resulted in the atomization and fragmentation of what should be an integrated whole), they should do so respecting the complex set of historical, philosophical, cultural, and doctrinal issues that attends such a move. In other words, they should be doing systematic theology. So the two disciplines are not merely discrete ways of slicing the biblical pie. Instead, they should be seen as interdependent steps in the integrated task of doing theology as the people of God. We read Scripture according to its own redemptive-historical categories and then we apply this theological framework in the development of a theological vision of Christian faith and practice (for more in this vein, see Richard Lints, [The Fabric of Theology](#)).

To return to the original point, ST influences BT in that it shapes the hermeneutical, exegetical, and theological assumptions we bring to the biblical text. This is not merely a hazard of the interpretive task, something to be acknowledged and then overcome in attempt to arrive at some kind of pristine objectivity. Theological presuppositions are not only unavoidable; they are indispensable. When they are being properly reformed according to Scripture (more on this in the next post), our theological presuppositions help guide and govern our readings of the biblical text. This truth was acknowledged early on in church history, as Christians recognized the need to read Scripture according to the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith. Heretics were quoting Scripture too. So there was (and is) a need to adjudicate which readings of Scripture were permissible and which were

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not. The rule of faith was simply a summary of the basic truths of the gospel (which were eventually summarized in the ecumenical creeds) in an attempt to regulate readings of the biblical revelation.

There is biblical precedent for such a regulated understanding of biblical interpretation. In 1 Corinthians 15:3 Paul writes, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received." There is a hermeneutical and theological priority placed upon the good news of Christ's saving death, burial and resurrection. Paul writes about many important things, but there is one thing that is of preeminent importance, and if we misunderstand this one thing, then we are in danger of abandoning the faith altogether (Gal. 1:6-9).

So the basic truths of the gospel shape, inform and regulate our readings of the biblical narrative. In other words, our ST rightly influences our BT. There are perhaps many other ways that we can describe the influence of ST on BT, but this evangelical (gospel-oriented) influence is preeminent.



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