Systematic Theology and the Bible
By Justyn Terry

This is an attempt to sketch out how systematic theology relates to the Bible, chiefly from the standpoint of Evangelical theology. We shall look at systematic theology in relation to biblical theology and to biblical authority, before turning to see how systematic theology actually uses the Bible. My goal is to show that systematic theology should be seen as an ally to biblical theology, not only because it seeks to use its insights for the Church and the world, but also because it can offer insights on the Bible from its own perspective.

Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology

Systematic theology and biblical theology have much in common for Evangelicals, since the supreme authority of the Bible is a central commitment for us. They also have something in common for many theologians, not just Evangelicals, because they share a conviction about the overall coherence of the Christian message. However, they are different disciplines, as we can see from the questions they address.

- Biblical theology responds to the question: What does the Bible say?
- Systematic theology answers the question: What do Christians believe?

That is not at all to suggest Christian beliefs do not come from the Bible; the Bible is the primary source of Christian theology. The point instead is that systematic theology always has an eye to the world and as well to the church. We want to articulate the Christian Gospel in ways that can be understood by a contemporary audience that may or may not have an interest in the Bible. To use an image that Karl Barth applied to preachers, the systematic theologian has the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

Now we must immediately acknowledge theologians who do not have Evangelical commitments differ widely on how they treat the Bible, and even on how much of it they regard as authoritative. John Webster in his fine study, *Holy Scripture*, points to both Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel for their influence on the more revisionist theologians. Kant contrasted the poor benighted “biblical theologian” confined in the “ecclesiastical faith, which is based on statutes” with the rational theologian who strides through “free and open fields of private judgement and philosophy.” And Hegel says there are pious folk who “hold exclusively to the Bible,” but, “[t]heologians… they are not; such an attitude has nothing of a scientific, theological character.” These views of Kant and

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1 Many systematic theologians, like Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann and Colin Gunton, however, reject the idea that they are trying to build a harmonious and non-contradictory system able to say everything on any doctrinal point. Colin Gunton, for instance sees the goal of systematic theology as relating one Christian doctrine to another. See Trevor Hart, “Systematic – in what sense?” in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004. 341ff
2 Compare Karl Barth’s distinction between “what the apostles and prophets said” and “what we must say on the basis of what the apostles and prophets said.” Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. 1/1, 16. See also Trevor Hart’s comments on this, which in my view clarify this distinction without undermining it. Hart. *Out of Egypt*. 346ff.
Hegel tend to separate biblical exegesis from theological discourse and that is a path that leads to the dilution of the distinctively Christian character of theology.

The Evangelical systematic theologian is not willing to place reason about revelation in this way and instead follows Augustine’s dictum: crede ut intelligas (believe in order that you may understand) and Anselm’s fides quaerens intellectum (faith seeking understanding). This is the course taken by Martin Luther and John Calvin and reasserted by Karl Barth. Evangelical theologians therefore take biblical theology and ask, How do we proclaim this to a contemporary audience? How can we state our beliefs in a way that scratches where our generation itches? And, convinced as we are that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles 1:9), we go on to ask, Can theologians from the past, or the present, help us to do so? This is where historical and contemporary theology come to our aid.

How this process of formulating contemporary statements of Christian belief is carried out matters a great deal. By the nature of its attempt to speak to questions like: Who are we? Where are we? What is wrong? and What is the solution?6, systematic theology is inherently world-view forming.7 It shapes how we see God, ourselves, and the world in which we live. So it matters enormously that this outlook is rooted in the biblical revelation. The exact way in which theologians handle the Bible is therefore of crucial concern.

Systematic Theology and Biblical Authority

Systematic theology talks about Scripture (its role in formulating theology) and it uses Scripture (in formulating theology). It talks about biblical inspiration, perspicuity, sufficiency, infallibility, inerrancy and authority. It then gets on with the task of using the Bible.

One of the first hermeneutical questions that has to be addressed by the systematic theologian concerns the relative place of the Bible in relation to other authorities like reason, tradition, experience and culture. Since the Enlightenment, reason, experience and culture have often been given higher authority than the Bible. But Alister McGrath summarises the dangers of that approach.

- If reason is primary, God’s revelation is limited by human thought.
- If tradition is primary, God’s revelation may be hidden by our traditions (Mk 7:9)
- If culture is primary, God’s revelation is filtered through shifting current opinion
- If experience is primary, God’s revelation is subjected to my revelation.8

All these can imprison the Bible and effectively silence it.

But that does not mean the Evangelical commitment to the supreme authority of the Bible leaves no place for reason, tradition and experience. The great Lutheran slogan Sola Scriptura (the Bible alone) was intended to counter the pope, who was effectively asserting his own authority over the

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Bible as its chief interpreter, not to suggest there is no place for reason and tradition. These authorities have always had their place in Evangelical thinking, not replacing or downgrading the biblical revelation, but as means for comprehending it.

- Reason is to be applied to Scripture prayerfully with the Spirit’s help (1 Cor 2:14)
- Tradition is to be used in seeking to understand Scripture (e.g. commentaries).
- Experience/culture are to be guided by Scripture and used to demonstrate it.

This prioritising of the Bible has traditionally been a standard practice of Anglican Theology except in its Latitudinarian/Liberal forms. Richard Hooker is widely misrepresented here as suggesting a three-legged stool of Scripture, reason and tradition. It is important to remember that he said, “[W]hat Scripture doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by force of reason; after these the voice of the Church succeedeth.” (Ecclesiastical Polity V.8.2). The Bible clearly has priority for Hooker, as indeed it has had for the great majority of Anglican theologians.

**Systematic Theology and the Use of the Bible**

So in practice, what happens when a systematic theologian reaches for his or her Bible in the course of some writing? Much depends, of course, on who the theologian is, but we would expect some or all of the following:

1. References to biblical texts to support points being made.
2. Summary of biblical passages that strengthen or illustrate the argument.
3. Discussion of a key biblical word for its doctrinal implications.
4. Use of themes in biblical theology to help understand an issue.

Of these, the third and fourth are usually undertaken using existing biblical scholarship rather than by undertaking original research.

The question of how systematic theology and the Bible are related has been a major concern of Francis Watson, an Evangelical Anglican with expertise in both disciplines. He is keen to bridge the gulf that Kant and Hegel helped dig between these two fields. “Exegesis,” he says, “can serve to develop, clarify and correct a given theological position; and conversely a given theological position can serve to give exegesis an orientation and a relevance that it would lack if pursued in a merely random fashion.” So systematic theologians need biblical scholarship and biblical theologians need awareness of theological positions. Our theological positions shape our reading of Scripture and our reading of Scripture should shape our theological positions. That is the hermeneutical circle in which we find ourselves. The model set for us by Luther, Calvin and Barth in writing biblical commentaries as well as doctrinal statements, has much to commend it, and the recent spate of publications of theological commentaries might well be in part at least a result of Watson’s voice on this subject.

But how does a systematic theologian use the Bible for explicitly doctrinal work? To answer that, Francis Watson points us to Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. Hays uses ideas from David Kelsey and others to develop some probing questions to assess the use ethicists make of

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the Bible. The first three transfer well to systematics (the fourth is about the fruit of this approach in the community of faith), and since they are so helpful to this discussion, I shall quote them in full.

I. Descriptive
   How accurate/adequate is the exegesis of the texts used?

II. Synthetic
   A. Range: How comprehensive is the scope of texts deployed?
   B. Selection: Which biblical texts are used and not used?
   C. Is there a canon within the canon? How is selection determined?
   D. How does the interpreter handle texts that are in tension with his or her position?
   E. What focal images are employed?

III. Hermeneutical
   A. What is the mode of appeal to the text? What sort of work does Scripture do?
      What sort of proposals does it authorize?
      1. Rules
      2. Principles
      3. Paradigms
      4. Symbolic world
      5. The human condition
      6. The character of God
   B. What other sources of authority do the interpreters rely on?
      1. Tradition
      2. Reason
      3. Experience

These questions can be powerful tools for theologians to use in two ways. Firstly, they enable constructive criticism of the way other theologians handle the Bible. For instance, they reveal how several well-known accounts of the atonement make very selective use of the Bible and give priority to reason, experience or tradition over the Bible. Secondly, they can help systematic theologians to make better use of the Bible. Christian doctrine should ideally be based on careful exegesis of the whole range of relevant Scripture, be clear about how it uses that material, and give priority to Scripture over reason, tradition and experience. The questions that Hays poses can help us towards that goal.

Conclusion

Systematic theology, at least in its Evangelical forms, should be seen as an aid to biblical study and an ally to biblical scholarship. It encourages giving serious attention to biblical theology, to the great Christian thinkers of the past and present, and to contemporary non-Christian thought. And it does so in a way that endeavours to meet current challenges to Christian faith with the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How the Bible is handled by systematic theologians will vary from one to

another. But Francis Watson’s call for biblical and systematic theology to be drawn back together needs to be heard, and he and others like Richard Hays, have given us many of the tools that we need in order to do so.

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