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# DOGMATIC AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: CONTINUED TENSION OR RESTORED RELATIONSHIP?

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The aim of this article is to reflect briefly on the rather unsteady relation of biblical theology and dogmatic theology by first asking where the relationship atrophied and, second, by asking what can be done to encourage more effective discussion which might lead to a restoration of relationship between these disciplines. At the outset, however, it is important to keep in mind that ‘dogmatic theology’ does not refer here to the ‘rediscovery’ of contextualised approaches to doctrine, but to the task whereby conceptual vocabularies and arguments are arranged around exegetical themes, with the aim of informing the church’s reading of and listening to Holy Scripture. And by ‘biblical theology’ what is implied here is not the ‘authorial’ discipline of exegesis *in abstracto*, but rather exegetical practice set within the broader attempt to trace the unfolding drama of divine revelation in its historical and canonical aspect.

## INITIAL EXEMPLARS OF DOGMATIC AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Given the latter, the Reformation offered the important bedrock upon which later proposals of biblical theology were founded. At the most basic exegetical level, the Reformers applied their humanist education to the study of Scripture and, secondarily but no less importantly, to the patristic thinkers. Hesitations may well be registered regarding their achievement in particular cases, of course, but it cannot be denied that they brought to their craft a humanistic focus on context, history, and philology which had been absent in the commentaries of the medieval period.

That their vernacular translations of the biblical text is often recognised as having a seminal impact on current Western languages is a sign of the sheer depth of the Reformers’ philological skill as well as their awareness of the history of source-criticism. This is likewise the case in looking to the Reformation’s rekindled attention to the literal sense of

the text and the resultant hermeneutical statements of the basic clarity of Scripture, the sufficiency of Scripture, and the 'analogy of faith'.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the exemplars of dogmatic theology were also exegetes, virtuosos of language and textual criticism. Although his commentaries are consulted more frequently today than in his own time, for instance, John Calvin was not only one among many of his colleagues, but in terms of technical education and proficiency he was outstripped by many of contemporaries whose names are largely forgotten to the pages of history.

Catholic and Protestant scholastics, in spite of their method of dogmatics, were often as skilful in preaching, liturgy, and pastoral care. They acknowledged that different duties called for different techniques, but their varied corpus was united by their ecclesial vocation and responsibility. Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva and an influential scholastic, is perhaps more widely known today for his offerings to New Testament scholarship than for his tract, *Tabula praedestinationis*.<sup>2</sup> Although some tend to juxtapose the pastoral spirit of the Heidelberg Catechism with a fanatically depreciatory dogmatic scholasticism, Ursinus and Olevianus—the Catechism's authors—were among the most exact and meticulous of the scholastic federal theologians. And even if material differences are found with these writers, the Protestant scholastics and orthodox embody a refined endeavour in scholarly exegesis, catholic freedom, and a thirst for concurrently solidifying the achievements of the Reformation whilst surveying still greater hinterlands in the interest of 'always being reformed according to the Word of God'. The importance of such endeavours are perhaps sketched in Karl Barth's concluding comments to his 1923 lectures on the Reformed confessions:

I hope that it has become clear to you how worthwhile it is to research the thinking of the Reformed fathers. Although they were not exempted from the 'confusion of humans'... they lived in a world of rich and profound insights and learnings [...] Beyond that, it is possible earnestly to *stand quietly* before the eternal questions and answers which once required of our fathers that they confess [...] When that is done, more seriously perhaps by a *young* generation that knows better what real questions and answers are than do many

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the Reformation and post-Reformation approach to the 'properties' of Holy Scripture, see R. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy* ca. 1520 to ca. 1725, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MN: Baker Academic, 2003), 2, ch. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Beza's 'Table of Predestination' has various English translations, e.g., J. Stockwood (trans.), *The Treasure of Truth, Touching the grounde works of man his salvation, and Chiefest Points of Christian Religion* (London: Thomas Woodcocke, 1576).

older folks, then we need *not* be ultimately fearful about the future of theology and the church, in spite of all serious concerns about their present internal confusion.<sup>3</sup>

## POST-REFORMATION DOGMATIC AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Federal theology, moreover, was a vital historical link between classic dogmatics and an early biblical theology. The founding father of biblical theology, Johannes Cocceius, was himself a typical representative of his circle of thinkers. The growing significance of 'covenant' as a theme was not advanced as a substitute for the seemingly speculative categories of scholastic method but was produced from within the Protestant scholastic project itself. It therefore signifies a protest to the distortion of post-Reformation theology as engrossed in mere ahistorical abstraction.<sup>4</sup> Of course, none of this is to be simply repeated wholesale. For example, developments in biblical studies essentially alter the course of discovery and refinement. But such discoveries can also add further facts in support of preceding consensus. Despite gains since their day, the massive accomplishments of the older systems signify the realities which once were achieved in combining exegesis and dogmatics in a ceaseless dialectic which was profitable not only for the academy but for the church and not only for faith but for practice as well. However similar the Protestant scholastics appeared to be to their medieval forefathers in terms of method, their extent of learning helped them not only to criticize the older theological schemes at needed points but to do so with constructive awareness in order to produce alternative dogmatic accounts.

It may well be that post-Reformation dogmatic theology is less lively than the preaching and popular polemics of the Reformers themselves. Yet in its increasing appreciation for the model of Christ the Mediator, the 'second Adam', this dogmatic theology turned away from the dualisms that not only engrossed the medieval synthesis but also disturbed modern criticism and apologetics. In so doing, they turned away from the ideal of timeless ideas, namely, in approaching the object of theology as one might approach another person. By drawing on the covenant theology that they were convinced originated in the biblical text, theology had a

<sup>3</sup> K. Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. D. Guder and J. Guder (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), pp. 224f. (emphasis original).

<sup>4</sup> J. Cocceius, *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento Dei* (Leiden: Elseviriorum, 1654), esp. XVI. See the recent English translation in C. Carmichael (trans.), *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014).

fundamental obligation to a historical-eschatological hermeneutic which centred on Jesus Christ. One may indeed disagree with the conclusions of a Cocceius, a Beza, or an Ursinus, but only with insufficient knowledge could one say that they exchanged a speculative method for exegesis and levied an abstract system upon the biblical text.

Yet with the rise of rationalism, criticism exiled authority, whether ecclesial or textual. Instead of beginning with the Anselmian *credo*, one was to begin with the Cartesian *cogito* and establish universal grounds for an understanding which transcended texts and traditions. Helped by the pietistic polemic against dogmatics, the Enlightenment established as the criterion for 'truth' that which was comprehensible to an allegedly universal autonomous reason. It is the Enlightenment, not Protestant scholasticism, which treated the scriptures as a source to be pillaged by criticism until the historical characteristics of divine revelation were detached from the timeless truths of reason and morality. When the Romantics added experience as a foundation—or in Schleiermacher's terms, a 'feeling of dependence'—pietism and rationalism united in Protestant liberalism, and the specific, historical, dynamic shape of revelation was considered as less genuine than the universal, abstract, static gnosis accessible to anyone with the right method. For instance, Johan Gabler's 'Distinction between Dogmatic and Biblical Theology' of 1787 set out to mark the limits of biblical theology and dogmatics, comparing them in terms of the historical versus the didactic, antedating the now widespread conflict between dynamic and static methods.<sup>5</sup>

## SUSPICIONS AND TENSIONS

Yet the current biblical theology programme is undergoing an inner debate. On the one hand, there are those who insist a biblical theology grounded in the church, and those who, on the other hand, favour biblical theology as being a relatively independent academic discipline, concerned with 'authorial' exegetical practice, and wary of dogmatic schemes. Why does this tension currently exist? Undoubtedly, there are many reasons that could be put forth. However, when the latter approach to biblical theology is pressed—namely that, as an academic discipline, biblical theology reduces to 'authorial' exegesis—several surprising reasons come to

<sup>5</sup> J.P. Gabler, *De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus* (1787). See the excellent English translation and commentary in J. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldredge, 'J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980), 133–44.

light as to why the current tensions between biblical and dogmatic theology exist.

(1) The first reason is an academic suspicion of dogmatic theology which acts as an alien structure imposed on the biblical text. Oscar Cullmann states that doing theological ‘justice to the material’ inherently involves the avoidance of ‘imposing an external dogmatic scheme upon [for example] the Christology of the New Testament’.<sup>6</sup> Such a suspicion of dogmatics in biblical theology is due, in part, says Walter Brueggemann, to the ‘tyranny of reductionism (in the *church*)’, namely, the danger that ‘we want our interpretation to be included in the scope of the authority we assign to the Bible, so that we imagine we possess an “authorized” interpretation.’<sup>7</sup> While one may understand the irritation which often attends reactionary fundamentalism, what is the effect of stating the extensive generalisation of ‘reductionism (in the *church*)’ or avoiding an ‘external dogmatic scheme’? The effect, of course, is that one cannot really know what Scripture says without appropriate authority—that is, the biblical scholar. Thus something akin to biblical literalism gets closer to the content of the text than the fundamentalism against which it often registers complaint.

Across the continuum of theology, therefore, one notices a retort against doctrine and particularly against dogmatic schemes. Several biblical scholars place the collective consensus of an ecclesial community to one side. That is, one either accepts the ‘reductionist’ view of God that one meets in the church theologies and confessions, or allows the Bible to have its say. The reason for this, says James Barr, is a matter of the different sources for the two disciplines. Whereas biblical theology finds its source in the Bible, dogmatic theology finds its source ‘not in the Bible’ but in ‘the tradition of regulative decisions which had a part in the formation of the biblical texts’.<sup>8</sup> And yet can interpretation be identified merely with doing ‘justice to the material’ by ‘what the Bible says’ in light of what a great cloud of witnesses has said the Bible says? The choice that biblical scholars often put to their students, though offered as a choice between domineering church systems and the ‘obvious’ interpretation of Scripture, is nothing more than a choice between the church’s consensual reading of

<sup>6</sup> O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. S.C. Guthrie and C.A.M. Hall, revised edition (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1963), p. 315.

<sup>7</sup> W. Brueggeman, *The Book that Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> J. Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 74.

Scripture over against the interpretation offered by a current consensus of the academic guild or individual scholar.

However, after deconstructing the totalising assertions of individual biblical scholars against the totalising assertions of the past, biblical scholars did indeed positively challenge the summative interpretation of the medieval church. Yet these exegetes who challenged some traditional interpretations were also servants of the church who outlined confessions and catechisms in order to articulate a common faith. The Reformers did not start *de novo*, that is, doggedly determined to wipe the slate and begin anew with the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, and other broad topics of agreement. Nevertheless, we would do well to be attentive to Brueggeman, Cullmann, Barr and others in not allowing biblical scholarship generally and biblical theology particularly to be hushed in their unique contribution by placing our confessions above Scripture, as though placing our hands over our ears. An authentically 'confessional' approach has maintained that the only basis for contribution is that these affirmations faithfully echo the fundamental teachings of Holy Scripture. Reading Scripture faithfully with the church is the only constructive way forward, but exegesis must continue to remind the Christian reader that dogmatics is never finished even if confessional declarations remain faithful accounts of Scripture.

The assumption of some biblical scholars seems to be that the very proposal of a dogmatic scheme is to do an injustice to the text, a task deemed both foolish and brash. Is it wise, much less possible, then, to uphold that a particular confession of faith itself includes the system of doctrine taught in Scripture? And is it then still possible to articulate the features of such a system? On one hand, it is beneficial to ask that question. For too long this was taken for granted, and in that setting it became easier for dogmaticians to lord over the text and to engage in exegesis only to validate a position that may not arise naturally, either directly or by warranted results from clear passages. In some instances, particularly amongst the tomes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there emerged unoriginal dogmatic schemes. It is as likely for Protestants as anyone else to forfeit the awe and wonder of labouring with a text and instead rely on stock formulations. Just as the Reformers protested that if one wanted to investigate the scriptures it was almost always done by digging through several layers of commentaries, too much current theology has been inhaled as second-hand orthodox smoke.

Given this, it would be useful perhaps, with more space, to trace an appraisal of recent dogmatic and biblical theologies. There is satisfactory warrant, of course, for biblical scholars to worry that their dogmatic colleagues raise a 'Theology and . . .' approach to such a hermeneutical

status that exegesis is labelled servant rather than lord. In present circles of evangelical opinion, for example, the increasingly prevalent examples of 'Theology and . . .' tend to be focused either on wooden amplifications of post-war anxieties or on the seemingly endless 'rediscovery' of aesthetic and contextualised approaches to doctrine. Lacking the breadth and depth of classic dogmatic schemes, this formulaic and 'innovative' approach tends to depict such presentations as hollow and predictable. Important theologians are frequently taken into account, but interaction with paradigmatic proposals in biblical studies, historical, and even important dogmatic theologies from other traditions are scarce. None of this bears a likeness to the superior examples of patristic or early Protestant dogmatic systems and the more recent ones situated in that stream. Nevertheless, a reintegration and restoration of these two disciplines is required for the health of each.

(2) Briefly, a second reason for the biblical scholar's suspicion of dogmatic theology is found precisely in the system or scheme itself—that is, the critique of dogmatics as a discourse foreign to the biblical domain. On the one hand, biblical scholars vote in favour of 'existence' over the 'rational objectivity' of the so-called scheme of dogmatics; namely, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob over against the god of the philosophers. The God of biblical theology, it might be said, is a living Subject who acts in history and in the concrete life of a historical community; the God of theology is an Object who is 'known' as the *causa sui*, the supreme being in the chain of Being. Caricatures aside: a personal relationship with a 'Thou' who is truly 'other' and beyond understanding is exchanged for an impersonal, abstract, and scientific concept of *deitas*. Thus (onto) theology lives and moves and has its being in someone or something other than YHWH.

## THE GROUND OF DOGMATIC AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

As with the concern to ensure the possibility of exegesis to always surprise and reform our dogmatic paradigms, the suspicion that dogmatic theology subjects its discourse to questions and sometimes even answers that are irrelevant and at points even hostile to biblical faith is, unfortunately, well founded. However, if post-structuralist critics of the onto-theological scheme can themselves appeal to such pre-modern sources as Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, perhaps biblical scholars will patiently wait for contemporary dogmatics to come into stride with critique.

It was not twentieth-century phenomenology, after all, but Calvin who demanded that theology avoid the speculative metaphysical question 'What is God?' and instead pursue the knowledge of who God is and



‘what is consistent with his nature’.<sup>9</sup> Thus dogmatic theology seeks to provide the ‘godly mind with a sort of index to what they should particularly look for in Scripture concerning God, and to direct their search to a sure goal’.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps more pointedly:

[W]hen faith is discussed in the schools, they call God simply the object of faith, and by fleeting speculations...lead miserable souls astray rather than direct them to a definite goal. For, since ‘God dwells in inaccessible light’ [1 Tim. 6:16], Christ must become our intermediary. Hence, he calls himself the ‘light of the world’ [John 8:12] [...] For God would have remained hidden afar off if Christ’s splendour had not beamed upon us.<sup>11</sup>

Calvin and his scholastic heirs insisted that theological prolegomena are related to the dogmatic scheme itself in an *a posteriori* rather than a *a priori* fashion. By turning away from the ‘god of the philosophers’ and instead to the ‘definite goal’, and from the knowledge of ‘What is God?’ to the knowledge of God’s self-revelation in ‘Christ’s splendour’—such thoughts can help retrieve a biblical narrative from its Platonizing falsifications, here and now. Christ as the Mediator—that is, his becoming ‘our intermediary’—is the foundation of all foundations. Mindful of the departure from the medieval system at essential turns, such rhetoric issuing from Calvin and Protestant orthodoxy pronounces an innovative approach with a clear aim: questions of ontology are wholly secondary to the fact that ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Cor. 5:19, ESV).

One can therefore agree with the assertion that the material narrative of the gospel determines the outline of Christian dogmatics. At the same moment, even approaching the theological task in this way, one must participate in metaphysical propositions. To proclaim, for instance, ‘God is One’ or to affirm the Trinity, the hypostatic union, and so forth, is to practice metaphysics. At stake here is not merely the prospect of dogmatics, but the prospect of faith and piety: prayer would be a misdirected cry, and praise would be deprived of an object beyond individual or communal experience, assembling a *deitas* on the grounds of creaturely needs or mystical assumptions. What is required here is a reintegration of exegesis and dogmatics, whereby Christian theology can begin to be distrustful of conjectural, false metaphysics that critics have every reason to scrutinise.

<sup>9</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox, 1960), I.ii.2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, I.x.1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, III.ii.1; cf. II.vi.4.

Beginning with the revelation of the divine name, leading to other confessional statements, God authorized Israel to ascribe specific attributes and to form concise propositions regarding the divine reality and God's relation to the world. And given the decisive revelation of God in Jesus Christ—that is, the fact that 'God would have remained hidden afar off if Christ's splendour had not beamed upon us'<sup>12</sup>—it is not surprising that the New Testament would contribute expressly to this account. Although this is not the place to make the case, the unanimity of the first five centuries regarding the two natures of Christ, for example, is unthinkable apart from the momentous expressions that one reads in the Gospels, Epistles, and in the sermons in Acts. If the biblical writers had not been instructed in the theology of the Hebrew scriptures, they would hardly have communicated so meaningfully the fact of Christ as the lens which made the whole canonical picture come into focus.

In light of present ideological and cultural setting, it may be time for a fresh proclamation of Christ and a renewed commitment to kerygmatic task. A doctrine of God in our day will therefore be best articulated not only by reiterating classical principles, but by simply tracing God's relation to history as the 'God of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Eph. 1:17). New schemes in dogmatic and biblical theology should indeed be encouraged. Moreover, new challenges to classic articulations cannot merely be rejected as 'heterodox', but such challenges will nevertheless have to be examined by the wise dogmatic reflection of the church on Holy Scripture, as is seen in its creeds, confessions, and catechisms. Theology thus serves to build up the church; it is not the gospel; it is not a 'means of grace', but rather a human work of thinking and speaking 'to please God' (1 Thess. 2:4). Because it is continually a *human* work, it shares in the weakness and shortcomings of its 'scholars' and of their age. And although it will not shrink from making needed metaphysical assertions, it will seek primarily (albeit in a weak, creaturely manner) to proclaim not itself, 'but Jesus Christ as Lord' (2 Cor. 4:5).

## CONCLUSION

Can there be an approach to dogmatic and biblical theology which does not merely recycle past labours but builds on them in the light of current exegesis as well as suitable conceptual insights from contemporary thought? Perhaps the notion of 'covenant', upon which this article first embarked, might be further expounded in a biblical-theological manner by tracing the specific arrangements throughout salvation history, and it

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

could be developed dogmatically by organizing the material in an evangelical manner. Thus, for instance, the union with Christ could become the paradigm within which one could relate election, reconciliation, sanctification, and glorification. In this way, the covenant—that resolve of the Father that there should be a ‘people for his own possession’ (1 Pet. 2:9)—becomes an integrative arrangement, and in so doing, it keeps each of these other elements from shifting or concealing the other, and allows for greater sophistication as well as range.

Yet in the end it is worth recognising that whilst biblical theologies are helpful for some tasks, dogmatic theologies are helpful for others. Biblical and dogmatic theology mutually ‘condition’ one other: each guiding the other away from false dichotomies and over-zealous enthusiasms, and instead point one another back to a proper grounding in gospel and exegesis. Thus, to obscure the real distinction between dogmatics and biblical theology is to fall into the danger of what Barr called ‘amateurism pretending to be professionalism’.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, to reduce dogmatic theology to biblical theology, or vice versa, as if only the latter actually engaged in genuine exegesis, and that the former need not engage in exegesis, is to echo an inimical notion which maintains that these disciplines retain their mutual tension instead of offering needed restoration.

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<sup>13</sup> Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology*, p. 70.